



GUARDIANS OF THE  
**AKASHA**



CELIA STANDER

# **Guardians of the Akasha**

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*For J, C & R: You are my Akasha.*

# Chapter 1

Keira's feet ached in the high heels she'd bought to go with her little black number. "Not so clever to go clubbing in new shoes," she grumbled to no one in particular.

She'd been trying to leave the club for the past hour, but Sammy and Alison had ignored her lagging energy and kept pulling her back onto the dance floor. A grin tugged at her mouth. Her friends had some animated moves. Sammy, especially, had no lack of confidence in the dancing department.

It was as if the knowledge that they were done with school, forever, had caused their brains to leave the building for a while. It had been two weeks of non-stop fun and partying since school's end. Tomorrow that would all come to an end, though. Sammy and Alison were booked on flights to join their parents overseas for the summer holiday, and Keira would stay with hers in London.

She hesitated in a pool of faded light cast by a streetlamp and glanced back towards the club. The distant boom-boom of the music's bass sounded like drums reverberating through the concrete jungle surrounding her. The flickering neon above Poison Ivy's entrance tempted her back, but the thought of her soft bed and a busy day ahead won the battle and she kept walking, grimacing as the shoes pinched her toes.

A quick look at her watch made Keira quicken her stride. The last train to Notting Hill left in thirty minutes; she didn't want to miss it. Poison Ivy was a bit remote and not their usual scene, but Sammy's latest crush had invited them to a private party and arranged VIP access.

“Too bad he didn’t arrange transport as well,” Keira muttered and shrugged deeper into her trench coat. Even in late spring, London’s midnight air held enough of a chill to turn her breath to a light vapour. She turned a corner and bumped into a couple locked in an octopus-clench. She mumbled an apology but could have been invisible for the notice they took.

Two blocks later and she could see the beckoning sign to the Underground station up ahead. She paused, got her mobile out of her clutch and sent off a quick text to the girls while she still had reception.

Sorry to have left, so tired & busy day ahead! Taking the tube. Have fun & c  
u at apartment. K x

A scuffle of feet sounded behind her. She looked over her shoulder and glimpsed movement in the shadows of a yawning doorway a few metres away.

*What was that?*

Keira put the phone away, gripped the little bag a bit tighter and set off again. “Blasted shoes!” Another pinch tempted her to kick the heels off and jog the last block to the Underground, but a glance at the cracked, littered pavement squelched that idea.

A cat yowled in the distance and Keira’s arms broke out with gooseflesh. Her eyes scanned the surrounding buildings; they all stood in dark isolation on either side of the street. There was no movement and no welcoming lights were on. She had a flashback to the scary movie she, Sammy, and Alison had watched a few nights ago. They derided the stupid girl who had left the safety of her house to investigate noises outside—at night—alone.

“Get a grip!” Keira scolded herself. “It is such a cliché. Girl alone outside—empty streets—cat yowling...”

*You should have waited for a taxi,* a little voice whispered in her mind.

“Hey, wait up!” A voice interrupted her inner monologue.

She took a quick glimpse back and remembered his face; he had tried to buy her a drink earlier, which she had refused. He smiled a hungry smile and stretched his legs to catch up with her.

Keira didn't wait.

"Come on, sugar!" He tried to sound friendly.

Keira shivered. She wasn't going to make it to the subway. *Leave me alone... leave me alone.*

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder, forced her to a stop and turned her around. "Hey, why in such a hurry, darlin'?" he asked with a leer.

"Please, leave me alone," Keira asked politely, stepping back from the brandy fumes on his breath.

"Hey, hey. A pretty little thing like you shouldn't be walkin' alone. Let me take you home," he reached out to touch her hair. Keira brushed his hand away and took another step back.

"Hey," he said again, sounding offended. "No need for that—just tryin' to help."

"I don't need your help." Keira clenched her hands into tight fists and locked her knees to stop her legs from shaking.

"Well now, I happen to think that you do. I been watchin' you tonight—such a pretty little thing." This time he was faster; he lurched closer and grabbed a fistful of her long dark hair, pulling her into him.

She tried to push him away, but he yanked harder on her hair and twisted her head back. She looked up; his intention was clear. He was strong, confident in his size, while she was young and easy prey.

He pressed his body against hers. "Comin' with me tonight—gonna have us some fun tonight," he sneered and pulled her towards a side alley.

"Please, I don't want to hurt you. Let me go and we'll forget about this," Keira tried to reason with him.

He laughed. "You, hurt me! I sure am gonna enjoy watchin' you try, honey."

"No!" She sobbed as he dragged her further into the darkness.

"Yes!" He taunted, not realising that she was talking to herself.

Keira bit her lip, trying to contain the tension building inside her. Years of suppression had done nothing to cool the core of molten lava that was now rising into the too familiar heat in her blood. Her mind and instincts battled each other as white hot rage threatened to explode out of every pore in her skin.

She didn't scream. Even if there were people around to help, it had reached the point where she didn't want to attract attention.

He dragged her behind a dumpster, pockmarked with weeping rust stains, and threw her up against a wall. She dimly registered the foul smell of rotten food and would have gagged but he held her throat with one hand as he fumbled with his belt with the other.

"C'mon baby, let's finish this," he muttered.

Keira struggled to drag air into her lungs, his vice-like grip threatened to cut her breath off. She kicked his shins and ground her heel into his foot until a vicious blow rocked her head back, slamming it against the bricks behind her.

Her mind lost the battle of controlling the beast within as her instincts took over and suddenly, she was in the eye of the storm. She felt the pressure around her neck and a sharp, loose brick digging into her back. None of that mattered.

Their faces were inches apart; his lips pulled back in a snarl and his eyes narrowed in slits of anticipation. She smiled and gently wrapped her fingers around his wrist.

"Shit!" He yanked his hand away from her neck, shaking it as if something had touched him with a glowing hot poker.

He pulled his shirt sleeve up and his eyes widened as he looked at the red, welted finger marks on his wrist.

It was his turn to take a step back, into the wind that now screeched like a banshee down the alley. Trash flew at him from all sides and he threw his arms up to protect his head; he stumbled and tried to prevent his fall, but an empty whiskey bottle hit him on the brow and sent him to his knees. He grabbed his face, then pulled his hands away and gasped at the blood.

“Who—what—?” he gibbered.

Keira glided closer, her long, dark hair rising like a halo around her head, moving of its own accord on the waves of power radiating from her body. She smiled a sad smile, bent down and murmured in his ear, “I am sorry, but I did ask nicely.”

He gave a small, shocked grunt, before he sank forward onto the ground and the wind died down around them.

She straightened up and stood for a few frozen seconds, staring at the unconscious body at her feet. The tempest inside her raged for a moment longer while the heat in her hands begged to be released and rid the world of one more predator.

*No.*

She took a deep, shuddering breath, turned her back on the alley and walked the remaining block to the Underground station.

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A few miles away, the old woman sat upright in her bed. “Keira,” she whispered in distress and reached for the phone.

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A few thousand miles away, an elegant nose turned east and black eyes closed as their owner gave a satisfied sigh.



“Now that felt familiar. Welcome back,” he drawled.

## Chapter 2

Julius cracked his knuckles. It was a nervous habit, one he tried hard to hide. He could never show weakness—refused to—but an interview with the Man tested his resolve. Midnight summonses wreaked havoc on his beauty sleep, but he knew better than to complain.

He clasped his hands behind his back and frowned at the bland elevator music. “Bloody hell, who chooses this crap,” he grumbled and stormed out as soon as the doors glided open on the thirteenth floor. Ms Domain greeted him with an imperceptible nod and a red-taloned finger that pointed at the black leather couch. She proceeded to ignore Julius and continued typing, her fingers a blur over a space-age keyboard.

*Bloody old crone!* Julius thought. *Doesn't she ever leave that chair?* The typing stopped and he looked up to meet her ice-cold eyes. He cracked his knuckles and she resumed her typing.

After what felt like a century of waiting and paging through promotional brochures on Du Pré Enterprises, Ms Domain nodded in his direction and pointed at the inner office's mahogany doors.

Julius got up, pulled at his brown, polyester suit, straightened his orange tie, and entered the office.

“Good morning, Julius,” a languid voice sounded from across the room. “Coffee?”

“Thank you, Sir. Yes, thank you.” Julius walked over and sat on the edge of the chair his boss had indicated.

*Doesn't he ever sleep?* Julius thought, glancing towards the floor to ceiling windows overlooking Central Park. Its

trees and footpaths were bathed in a soft glow, cast by myriad lamps and fairy lights scattered throughout the park. Julius, however, didn't appreciate the lights; he only saw the dark corners and shadows, perfect places for hiding and ambush.

"Sleep is so overrated, don't you agree?" Daemon asked.

"Yes, Sir," Julius gulped.

He was silent while Daemon poured coffee from a silver pot, then accepted the small bone-china cup and saucer carefully into his big, rough hands. He took a scalding gulp and clattered the empty cup down on the table in front of him.

He looked everywhere except at the man across from him, who was still delicately sipping his coffee. His eyes flitted across the bookshelves with glass fronts behind which, Daemon once told him, were priceless scrolls and first edition books. Julius had never been a believer in the value of the printed word. *Dust collectors*, he thought and gave a mental shrug. It was not his place to question Daemon's obsession. If the Man wanted to believe that an antique book will make him master of the universe, who was he to argue?

Julius felt the weight of Daemon's scrutiny and cleared his throat.

Eventually Daemon put his cup down on the table. "So. Do you have anything to report?"

"Yes, Sir. I do. Our people in London investigated the flare you sensed. They narrowed the location down to an area around a club called Poison Ivy. They are concentrating their efforts on people who were at the club at that time."

"Anyone interesting come up?"

"Not yet, Sir. It's only been a few hours, Sir. There were many people coming and going," Julius' voice dribbled away as he caught Daemon's glare.

He cleared his throat. "However, our source in the police informed me that a man was taken to a nearby hospital. He

was delirious, going on about being attacked by a witch in a wind. No one is taking him seriously, but he was also at the club.”

Daemon got up and paced the Persian carpets scattered on the floor of his office. “Have they found this man and interviewed him?”

Julius jumped up as well and clenched his fists behind his back. “No, Sir,” he replied. “He checked out of the hospital an hour ago. The team in London is working on it.”

“Good,” Daemon stopped in front of the big windows. He peered down at the street. New York’s traffic had not yet begun its madness, but even when it did, no blaring horns would penetrate the sound proofed room. Noise stayed out. And in.

Daemon turned to face his Lieutenant. “So, we are looking for a woman and she can manipulate the wind. We are making progress.” He tugged absent-mindedly at the diamond studded cufflinks peeking out under the sleeves of his midnight-black Armani suit.

“Find her,” he instructed. “I want her brought to our side—with or without force.”

Julius nodded obediently; he knew better than to ask how he was to accomplish this mission. Besides, he enjoyed the *carte blanche* that Daemon gave him. It made the hunt all the more interesting if someone got hurt in the process.

“Now, the old woman,” Daemon jumped to the next topic.

“Yes, Sir. She is well protected, unfortunately. She’ll be attending a family function tomorrow. We’ve checked out the venue, but there will be too many Guardians. And cattle as well. We can’t risk an attack in the open like that.”

“Hmm,” Daemon murmured again. “The cattle are not my concern. The day will come when they will be forced down where they belong, and we will take our place at the top.”

Julius got ready for the familiar rant, but Daemon controlled himself with visible effort and continued. "However, if she is surrounded by Guardians, it might be problematic."

"Sir," Julius hesitated.

"Speak!"

"Our insider reported that the old woman might take Marco with her to the function."

"Marco Santana?" Daemon hissed. His eyes flared and Julius took an involuntary step back.

"Yes, Sir," Julius swallowed.

"So, the old crone suspects something. She must be really concerned to have the Leader of the Draaken by her side," Daemon giggled.

The hair rose on the back of Julius' neck and his feet itched to leave the room, but his mind overrode the impulse and forced his body to remain still.

"Ha! The Guardians think their soldiers will protect them. They believe that Marco Santana and his Draaken are invincible. I will use their skins to bind my books!" Daemon spat.

The ringing of Julius' phone froze the scene. "Are you going to get that?" Daemon asked in velvet tones.

"Yes, Sir." Julius fumbled to get the phone out, flipped it open and listened to the person on the other side.

"Yes...yes...yes."

Daemon waited; his black eyes reaching furnace temperatures as his impatience grew.

"Hold on," Julius instructed and faced his boss. "Sir, good news. They've identified the woman from footage from a security camera outside the club. It shows her leaving, and the man who was attacked following closely behind. Her name is Keira Wilde."

"A Wilde. I should have known. That family is long overdue for its extinction," Daemon mused.

"Sir, they've uploaded a photo of her to my phone."

Daemon held his hand out in silent command. He stood staring at the small screen for a moment. "Well, well. Where *have* you been hiding," he murmured.

"Your orders, Sir?" Julius asked.

"Tell the team to intercept her; bring her here, unharmed. I would like to invite her to join my—our—cause. Also, make sure that security tape disappears."

Julius took back his phone, relayed the message and waited for further instructions.

"Go!" Daemon screeched. "Go to London and catch me some prey!"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. Goodbye, Sir!" Julius babbled and scrambled out of the office. He caught Ms Domain's smirk as he flew past her towards the fire escape door. He had no inclination to wait for the elevator.

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Flames flickered in Daemon's eyes as he stared at the door through which his Lieutenant had fled.

*So, you decided to show yourself again. All those years ago, you must have been just a girl. Your magick was only a flicker in the Akasha, but so pure—ahh—the feel of it!*

*You are so much stronger now, yet still uncontrolled. Does that mean the old woman hasn't gotten to you yet? Such power in such an alluring package. You would compliment me beautifully.*

*The culmination of years—decades—of planning is near. My destiny beckons. Come to me, come and let me show you how we will rule the world.*

## Chapter 3

*The cupboard was dark. One slice of light found its way through a hairline crack in the wooden door, illuminating dancing dust motes in a brief spotlight.*

*The musty smell of winter coats wrapped itself around her; she hugged her knees and squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to provide an escape for the threatening tears.*

*"I will not sneeze, I will not cry, I will not sneeze I will not cry."*

*Within her small body, the fear of discovery warred with a blinding need for revenge. Flashes of taunting children and a flying rock played itself in an unending loop through her mind. She pressed the back of her hand to her swollen lip. It wasn't bleeding anymore.*

*'Nagwa, I need you!' she whispered. "You were right: magick doesn't belong at school. Please, please take me away from this place," she stifled a sob.*

*Blinding light erupted into her hiding place as the cupboard's door flew open. "Got you, Devil's child!" a shrill voice exulted.*

*Sister Julia had found her.*

*The nun dragged her by her ear down an unending, shadowed passage; the pain was a flowering red bloom in her head. Glimpses of girls whispering behind their hands flowed past her as she stumbled in the nun's wake. Every snicker and glare was a blow to her heart.*

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Keira clawed her way out of the depths of the nightmare. She dragged her eyes open and fought the panic down as her limbs refused to move; a twisted nest of sheets held her tight. She took a few deep breaths and extracted herself from the tangled mess. Once free, she fell back on her pillow and tried to get her racing heart back to a steady rhythm.

It had been a long time since this nightmare reared its ugly head. Keira's first years at St. Catherine's boarding school were unpleasant, to say the least. That particular day, however, had manifested itself in recurring nightmares that led to many sleepless nights.

Her parents had sent her to St. Catherine's when she was six years old. It was the thing to do for wealthy families that wanted their little girls to grow up and become ladies of good standing. The only problem was that Keira stood out like a thoroughbred in a tank full of sharks.

It didn't help her popularity that a wind seemed to rise whenever she got angry, or that a black raven was spotted sitting in the tree outside her room on the boarding school's second floor. Neither did it help that the three girls she shared a room with that first year saw her talking to the raven when he flew to the windowsill; nor that they heard her call him 'Nagwa' and asked him to take her home.

On the day of the nightmare, after enduring two years of taunting, Keira's control snapped. It was lunch time when Keira heard the raven's harsh 'kruk-kruk' cry and girls' exited screeches. He must have been sleeping in the tree when the rock struck his body. He had fallen to the ground and was disoriented, desperately flapping his wings and trying to get back in the air. Keira had fought her way through the press of girls circling the injured bird, fell to her knees next to him and covered his body with her own.

"Who did this, who did this," she whispered in anguish. She touched his feathers and the connection was instantaneous. Her view shifted and became a wavering, monochromatic scene. She looked down at a little girl—



Isobel Montgomery—who lifted her arm and threw—*No time to fly away—the pain—*

Keira jumped to her feet and her scream of rage reverberated around the tight circle, killing the giggles faster than Sister Julia's frown ever could. A rising wind moaned through the tree and creaked its branches.

"Isobel," she hissed.

"Yes?" An angelic girl with wide, innocent blue eyes, stepped forward.

"You—" Keira didn't have words, she could only point at the raven at her feet.

"Yes," the girl grinned. "Birds carry disease, didn't you know? Look at it; we should just get rid of it."

Keira didn't see the second rock in Isobel's hand, but when the girl raised her arm and threw it at Nagwa, she lunged forward and it hit her on her mouth. She didn't register the taste of blood, only the metallic surge of adrenaline and burning explosion of fury in her body.

She raised her arms and the wind howled in response. Lightning snaked and crackled its way around the school's grounds. Girls screamed and ran for cover while Keira stood in the centre of the storm.

The next thing she remembered was cradling Nagwa in her arms, whispering to him to go home. He wasn't safe around her.

Time disappeared again and then she was hiding in the coat closet. Sister Julia found her and dragged her to the Mother Superior. The old nun's ranting about the work of the devil was brushed aside and the storm written off as a freak occurrence.

Keira wasn't punished, but that was the evening the nightmare began.

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Keira pushed herself up from the bed, swung her legs over the side and clung to the edge as a wave of dizziness and nausea sent her stomach roiling. Glimpses of a man's terror-filled eyes raced through her mind.

"Bloody hell!" Keira swore, dropping her head in her hands; then swore again as she touched her throbbing cheek.

"Keira! You awake? You said you wanted to get an early start," Alison called and knocked on her bedroom door. "Coffee's ready!"

"Yes—thanks—I'm coming!"

Keira stumbled into the en-suite bathroom and made it to the basin. She held on to the sides with both hands, leaned over and peered at herself in the mirror. A chalk white face framed by sleep-tangled hair reflected back at her. Dark rings lay like shadows under her eyes and the beginnings of a splendid purple bruise stained her cheekbone.

She sighed, bent her head down and stared intently at the small crack in the pale blue porcelain, trying to ignore a lurking headache and blot out the memories threatening to send her into a full-blown panic attack.

"Forget about it Keira! He won't remember a thing. No one saw you. You couldn't help it," she whispered over and over, like a comforting mantra meant to soothe and heal.

She took another deep steadying breath and straightened up. A slightly calmer face reflected back from the mirror, still pale, but the haunted look was gone from her eyes.

"Nothing a shower and a shovel full of cosmetics can't fix," she said, and set about getting ready for the day.

Twenty minutes later she was dressed, hair done and face skilfully made up. She walked into the kitchen and joined Alison at the small round breakfast table.

"You look beat for someone who came home before me," Alison remarked with a raised eyebrow and poured Keira a

cup of strong coffee.

"And you look fabulous for someone who probably didn't sleep at all," Keira replied.

"Who needs sleep?" Alison asked. "Besides, I'll sleep on the plane later. But wasn't the party the best? It's great to be done with school!" She laughed and twirled around the kitchen, her auburn curls bouncing and her blue eyes sparkling.

Keira smiled at her friend and nodded, "Yeah, it was great. Although, my liver is happy the partying is over."

"Like Sammy would say: 'Liver-schmiver, you only finish school once!'" Alison huffed. "Oh, and speaking of Sammy, she said not to wake her up. You know how grumpy she gets if she hasn't had enough sleep. We said our goodbyes earlier when we got back from the club."

"About that," Keira said, tracing circles with her finger on the table top. "I'm sorry I left before you guys last night. I was exhausted, and you know—"

"Don't worry about it," Alison interrupted. "You've got a busy weekend ahead. We understand." She stopped next to Keira's chair and gave her shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "Once Sammy's left tomorrow, you'll have the place to yourself. Take the time to figure out what you're going to tell your parents."

Alison's parents had bought the apartment when Notting Hill was still an undesirable artists' colony. They didn't view the area's booming desirability and influx of gentry a plus and had, for the past few years, only used the apartment when they visited Alison at St. Catherine's on a stop-over on one of their trips around the world.

They did however concede that it would be a good place for their youngest child and only daughter to live when she embarked on her career and had handed Alison the keys on her graduation day, two weeks ago. Much to Keira and Sammy's delight, she had immediately invited them to be her roommates.

The only hitch was that Keira hadn't told her parents yet.

"Of course, I still think you should do that gap year. You've always talked about travelling the world. Now's your chance!" Alison encouraged.

"Great advice," Keira took a sip of her coffee. "It's just a pity that one, my parents don't support the idea and two, they've already enrolled me for college in the new term. My dad is so happy 'cause he thinks I'll be following in his footsteps. If he could call that company 'Wilde and Daughter Architects, Inc.', he would have."

Alison perched next to Keira and leaned her elbows on the table. "Look, Sammy and I will be back soon, then we can mount a frontal attack and convince your parents you don't need to go, at least not right away. Tell them you need more time to decide."

"I'll try," Keira sighed. "I know I've said it a million times before, but you two are so lucky. Your parents actually *support* you in what you want to do."

"That's only because we've both got older siblings who have worn them down by now. They don't have the energy for another war. I think they're just happy we're doing something that might make us a bit of money."

"Well, I'm sure you'll end up at Vogue and Sammy at Stella McCartney's. Promise me you'll throw some samples my way when you're both famous!"

"Ha!" Alison laughed. "I've got this funny feeling that you'll get there before us!"

The girls shared a giggle and clinked their coffee cups together in a toast. "To fame and fortune!" they cried, then shushed each other with glances down the passage to Sammy's closed bedroom door.

"How about some breakfast?" Alison asked. "You know, you do look a little pale. Sure you're up to shopping today?"

"No breakfast, thanks." Keira couldn't face the thought of food. "I have to go. The birthday is tomorrow. Can you

imagine what will happen if I show up without a present for my mother?"

Alison nodded in sympathy. "She does tend to get her knickers in a knot about things."

Keira grimaced. "It's my own fault, leaving it until the last minute."

"Are you taking the photos tomorrow?"

"No," Keira said and looked down into her cup. "Mother has hired a 'professional.'"

Alison let rip with an unladylike swear word. "You are the most professional photographer I know! Have your parents even seen your work?"

"Only the flowers and stuff, I haven't shown them the abstracts. It doesn't matter though. This way I can sit back and enjoy the day without having to rush around like mad. Besides, Aunt Vic is going to be there; I haven't seen her in ages."

"Hmph! We'll talk about this when I get back. Unfortunately, I've got to go or I'll miss my flight, but please remember my invitation. You could get the first flight to Toronto after your mother's party. Come stay at my parents' lodge for a few days. You know they love you. Just think, there's bound to be a cute ski instructor—or two—who could keep us occupied. Those boys have got nothing to do in summer."

"Thanks," Keira laughed. "Please don't tempt me. I already had to beg and plead to get these couple of weeks with you girls at the apartment, and I still have to tell my parents that I want to stay here permanently. There is no way they'd let me go off to Canada."

"Okay," Alison said with resignation. "But you know what they say—all work and no play—"

"Yes, yes," Keira said. "Don't worry, we'll make a plan. I'll come visit, sooner rather than later."

"Good, I'm keeping you to that," Alison said. "Well, good luck for tomorrow. I've got to go." She gave Keira a quick

hug, walked to the front door and picked up the suitcase already waiting there. "I'll call when I arrive at my parents' place."

"Have fun," Keira smiled and walked with Alison to the elevator in the hall outside of the apartment.

"I intend to," Alison said. She paused with her finger on the button and looked back at Keira. "Are you sure you're all right? You look—I don't know—like you're on a different planet or something?"

"Don't worry!" Keira forced a laugh. "Give my love to your family and enjoy the holiday."

"Okay, okay!" Alison said. The elevator arrived and there was time for a last quick hug before Keira all but pushed her friend inside. Alison waved through the slowly closing doors. "Look after yourself, and remember to water the plants!" she shouted last minute instructions.

"I will, stop worrying," Keira laughed. She waited until the doors slid closed, then turned and slowly walked back into the apartment. She went to the kitchen and started washing the few breakfast dishes. She missed her friend already. She, Alison and Sammy, they were like the three Musketeers; inseparable at school and during holidays their parents let them spend together. Most of those holidays were spent with Sammy or Alison's parents; her own mother couldn't cope with the added burden of two more girls to supervise. Besides, Keira preferred getting away to her friends' homes.

She smiled, remembering the day in school when Alison had had her brilliant idea.

*"You want to travel the world, Keira, and I want to start my own magazine. You could write all the travel pieces for me!" Alison cried, her eyes glittering with excitement.*

*"Woohoo!" Sammy agreed. "And once I've started my design label, you could feature my designs in your magazine. I'll give you free clothes of course."*

*"Of course," Alison laughed. "And you'll design our wedding dresses too," and she and Sammy got that dreamy look in their eyes, even though neither had a boyfriend and both swore they would never be tied down by a husband.*

*Keira had pretended to play along. She had no intention of ever getting married or having children. It was difficult enough to hide her 'curse' from her friends. How would she ever hide it from a husband? Never mind having children; there was no way she was having kids and then finding out that this thing was hereditary. Not that her parents were in any way, shape, or form even slightly weird, but still.*

Keira sighed and dried her hands. She was as determined as ever to travel the world. She was eighteen years old and legally of age. She could pack up and go, if she wanted; but she would hate to leave on bad terms with her parents.

The time to face the argument about her future was getting closer. Not today though; today she had to find the perfect gift. But what to buy for a woman who has everything?

## Chapter 4

Victoria's immaculate, French-manicured fingernails tap-tapped an irritated rhythm on the table top. "What do you mean 'get Rafael to babysit her?'" she asked the man seated opposite her. "Do you not understand the severity of our situation?"

Victoria had called Marco earlier this morning, asking—or rather summoning—him to a meeting at her Hyde Park apartment. As a rule, you dropped whatever you were doing when the Leader of Council called.

"Of course I understand. You need more people on the street, Victoria. We have to show our strength, and I want to be out there hunting that bastard, not chained to some girl, even if she might be our saviour!" He slammed a fist down; the gold edged cups rattled in their saucers.

"Stop abusing my table, Marco," the old lady ordered. "I understand your need for revenge, but it is clouding your judgment. Any move against Daemon has to be carefully planned. He has surrounded himself with powerful allies and, misguided as they are, they will protect him. He spreads his poison and his Watchers' numbers grow every day. It is amazing how the vultures gather when they think there is a banquet to be had."

"But the Draaken is also growing, Victoria. We still have allies," Marco replied.

"Yes, I can only hope that it will be enough," Victoria frowned. "In the meantime, Keira cannot under any circumstances know that she is being protected. She has a certain stubbornness, you know," a hint of pride crept into



her voice. “And she is not an idiot. Your brother Rafael is not subtle enough.”

Marco combed his hand through his short, dark hair. “If her magick is as strong as you sensed it to be, she doesn’t need my protection. She should be able to take care of herself. Victoria, we have too many—”

“Are you being dense on purpose?” Victoria interrupted. “In the first place, if I sensed her magick this morning, don’t you think *he* did as well? That is exactly why she needs our—your—protection right now. Besides, her magick is unpredictable. She needs time to learn how to control and direct it. And in the second place, you only have to stay with her until I have convinced her to accompany me to the Council meeting.”

“Do you have any idea when that meeting will take place?” Marco asked.

“As soon as I’ve received confirmation that all the members will be there, which should be any day now. I will let you know.”

Marco glared at her from across the table. “Fine, I will stay with her for a few days. But after the meeting, I am back where I belong—out there!” and he jabbed his finger out towards the window and the streets below.

“I know you are frustrated, but you are the only one I can trust with this. She is more precious than you can begin to imagine. We *must* keep her safe.”

Now that he had capitulated to her will, Victoria could afford to be gentle and understanding. She had decades of practice in the political subtleties of being Leader of Council. Most of its members had no idea how old she truly was and would be astounded if they knew.

“Marco,” she said, “you have to promise me, no matter what happens, you will defend her with your life. The Guardians have been without a High Priestess for far too long. If only I—”

His glare softened and he interrupted, "Don't do this to yourself. You have led us and kept us on the right path. We didn't need a High Priestess. Besides, you couldn't have helped what happened."

Victoria smiled at him. Her mind agreed, but not her heart. She knew she would carry the guilt of her beloved's death for the rest of her days, along with her inability to continue as the Guardians' High Priestess after she had buried him.

She allowed herself one small moment of weakness. *Roberto. How I wish you were here, by my side. I can't do this without you.*

Victoria shrugged the melancholy off and continued. "Let's not talk about that now. Times have changed faster than any of us could have foreseen. Even Chloe was caught off-guard by the speed of Daemon's changing tactics."

"She blames herself for that, you know. She's working too hard trying to see what Daemon is doing," Marco said.

"Tell her to get enough rest," Victoria instructed. "Some events are beyond the vision of even a Seer as powerful as she. We need her to be at full strength when Daemon makes his final move."

Marco nodded. "To get back to Keira—I am still not convinced she can take the reins. She is completely untrained, it will take years to get her to your level, and that is time we don't have. You know how dangerous it is to put an untrained, untested initiate into the field." He paused, "Couldn't you—"

"No," Victoria shook her head in defeat. "My powers are weak. The duties of High Priestess are beyond me. You know that." Victoria fell silent, clamping down on the guilt searing through her, but not before she saw the concern on Marco's face.

Victoria was tired—drawn to the point of despair, yet it would be disastrous if Marco suspected. She couldn't lay this on his shoulders as well. If the Draaken knew how weak she

felt, they would rally around her. They'd be distracted—they would not protect Keira. Marco said the Guardians didn't need a High Priestess; he couldn't be more wrong. Over the years she had witnessed their steady, growing dependence on technology to manage their world and keep it hidden. At this rate, magick would soon become an add-on.

The Guardians needed someone who had the magickal power to guide them, and the natural understanding of technology that comes from growing up with it. That someone was Keira.

Victoria gave Marco a reassuring smile. "I have enough time to prepare her. Together, you will be invincible and the future of the Guardians will be secured. Thanks to your leadership as Commander of the Draaken, our security has also never been stronger. We will win this war with Daemon, once and for all."

"If it was up to me, this war would start tomorrow. The sooner I get my hands on Daemon, the better," Marco answered.

Victoria tried to distract him. "Thank you for accompanying me to the function tomorrow. It will give me the opportunity to introduce you to Keira. I will meet you at the Wilde's estate," and she dismissed him with a half wave.

Marco gave her a small bow and took his leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

A few minutes later, Victoria stood by the window and looked on as Marco crossed the street. She watched as his long, powerful strides carried him out of sight and could only silently reaffirm her trust in him: that he would be strong enough to carry the burden that would too soon be laid on those broad shoulders.

## Chapter 5

Alison stared through the plane's porthole at Heathrow Airport as they waited for take-off. The businessman next to her had given up trying to engage her in conversation and shook his newspaper out with an annoyed snap. She didn't care; her long yearned for holiday was about to begin.

It should have been more satisfying; she was done with school and its idiotic exams. Yet she couldn't get Keira's face out of her mind, how tired and drawn she looked. Keira thought she could hide these things from her friend, but Alison knew her too well.

The air hostess went through the routine safety demonstration, but Alison didn't hear a word. She remembered the first time she met Keira.

It was on Alison's first day at St. Catherine's Academy for Girls, the institute that prided itself on its reputation as a moulder of daughters of diplomats, corporate giants, and the *crème de la crème* of society. She was thirteen and stood in front of the class, waiting for the teacher to introduce her. The too-long school jumper hung from her bony shoulders like a sack; her red hair frizzed out around her head, and her black framed glasses slipped down to the end of her nose. She wished the earth would open up and swallow her whole.

Unfortunately, the other girls were like wolves scenting fear. They immediately started giggling and bumping elbows. The stage-whispered 'carrot top' and 'four eyes' were loud enough for her to hear and made her blush an even deeper shade of scarlet. She gratefully sunk into her chair when the teacher showed her where to sit.

Alison still thanked her guardian angels for putting her next to Keira that day. When she summoned the courage to look at the girl who sat next to her, she saw kind green eyes in a heart-shaped face, framed by shining black hair. "Hi, I'm Keira. Don't mind that lot. They're the same to all the new girls, just trying to feel superior." Alison smiled back. A friendship was born.

Sammy joined them six months later. She was short and feisty, her blood as hot as the Caribbean she came from. She was nearly expelled on her first day, when she got into a fist fight with someone who made a catty comment about her chocolate-brown skin.

After all these years, Alison's stomach muscles still clenched at the thought of some of the humiliations she had suffered, especially those inflicted after having crossed Isobel's path.

The corners of her lips turned up in a sudden smile. *There was that one day when they underestimated us*, she thought.

Alison and Sammy knew Keira as a nice, generous and very loyal friend, but also introverted, offering her opinion only when asked directly. While a fight would make Sammy want to attack and Alison froze when confronted, Keira would always choose to walk away, if she could.

That specific day, almost a year after they had become friends, the three girls sat under the ancient oak tree in front of the school's sprawling, Tudor-style main building. They listened to Alison read a letter from her parents in Canada. Her father wasn't a fan of e-mail and loved sending Alison long, handwritten letters.

Isobel and her group sauntered past and the next moment she grabbed the letter from Alison's hand and ripped it to shreds.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Sammy shouted, on her feet, fists clenched.

"I was doing bookworm here a favour," Isobel sneered. "God knows how she can read through those thick, ugly glasses. Must have got them from her grandma. Who was the letter from, nerd? A secret lover?" Isobel taunted Alison, grinning at her friends. They sniggered at the red-haired girl's humiliation.

Alison stared at the ground as tears dripped down her nose, onto her shiny black school shoes. The next moment, her arms broke out in gooseflesh as a wave of heat flowed past her. She glanced up and saw Keira step towards Isobel.

"Leave us alone, Isobel," Keira said, her voice eerily calm. Sammy and Alison looked at each other in surprise, then also stepped forward to stand on either side of their friend.

"Well, well, if it isn't Miss Congeniality herself," Isobel hissed.

Keira just stared at Isobel. "Back off. We've had enough of your shit."

Isobel gaped at her for a second, then her blue eyes narrowed and she jumped forward, hands outstretched and fingers clawed. Before either of the girls' friends could come between them, Keira had grabbed Isobel's raised arms, her hands gripping the other girl's wrists.

Isobel stopped in her tracks as if she had run into a brick wall. She gave an audible moan; her face turned deathly white and contorted in fear.

Keira let go of Isobel and the two girls stood staring at each other.

"You—are nothing—but a freak!" Isobel panted. She turned and took off as if all the hounds of hell were on her heels, followed by her entourage.

"Wow, girlfriend. What did you do?" Sammy asked with wide eyes.

"I showed her what would happen if she didn't leave us alone. I'm done playing nice with her," Keira answered through clenched teeth.

“Cool! Teach me how to do that?” Sammy said, but Keira laughed and changed the topic.

The three friends never spoke about what had happened, and neither did Isobel, but they were left alone from then on. Still, Alison couldn’t help but wonder.

She sighed and came back to reality as the plane jerked forward, increased speed, and lifted its nose into the overcast London sky.

Keira never needed her help before; why did she feel that she did now?

## Chapter 6

Keira hated shopping on a Saturday. Harrods was busy, more than usual. Shoppers strolled or stormed, depending on their mission for the day, and didn't care whether they caused a bottle-neck in the middle of an aisle or shouldered other people out of the way.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee enticed Keira to sit down at Ladurée and order a cup. The smiling waitress talked her into a guilty indulgence, a chocolate croissant. While she waited, Keira watched the unending stream of people flowing past the coffee shop:

Parents with happy children who licked huge multi-coloured lollipops that came with a guaranteed sugar rush; parents with screaming children who probably wanted lollipops and weren't getting any. Harried nannies dressed in black and white uniforms with babies in prams, following behind mothers dressed in pastels with ostrich leather bags clutched under an arm. Couples holding hands and wandering around in their own bubbles, old people and young people.

Keira never felt more alone.

*You will have this one day. You will belong, too,* a small voice whispered in her ear.

*Yeah, sure! Any man would be happy to be with a freak,* she answered the voice with a rueful shake of her head.

"Did you say something, Miss?" the waitress asked as she put the white porcelain cup and plate on the table.

"No, no, I didn't," Keira smiled her thanks and stirred cream into her coffee. She took a bite of the croissant and



sat back with a contented sigh as the satin smooth chocolate melted in her mouth.

*I don't do this every day.* She stilled her conscience that was flashing the image of a scale at her. She finished her coffee and last crumbs of the croissant, collected her bag, the wrapped Hermès scarf and perfume for her mother, and strolled out of the store.

Outside, a fresh breeze made her pause and wrap her own scarf around her neck before she turned left and walked down Brompton Road. She was in no hurry to get home; Sammy wouldn't stir until late afternoon and a quiet apartment held no appeal.

She was distracted, admiring a colourful window display, when a tall figure crashed into her. The wind knocked out of her, she gasped for breath. A pair of strong, leather-clad arms encircled her body as they both tumbled to the ground, the stranger breaking her fall. An electric current raised the hair on Keira's arms as an invisible ripple of familiar energy whooshed over her head. It lasted only a split second, the time it took for the man to turn her over and cover her body with his.

"Oh!" she cried and pushed him off of her.

"So sorry," a polite voice offered. Its owner got up and pulled Keira to her feet.

She looked up into cobalt blue eyes and forgot what she wanted to say.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Um, yes," she answered and looked away in confusion.

He bent down to pick up her scattered packages. "I'm sorry, I didn't look where I was going," he offered again.

"It's okay, I was distracted as well," Keira dusted off her coat.

He looked her up and down. "Your knee is bleeding, let me help you."

"No!" Keira dabbed at it with a tissue and tried to pull her skirt's hem lower over her knees. "It's okay." Sudden

tears of self-pity threatened to make a fool of her.

"I—I have to get home."

"My car is near, I could take you. It's the least I could do."

"No, thanks, I'll take a taxi," she said, backing away.

"Are you sure? It would be no trouble."

Keira shook her head, wanting nothing more than to get back to the apartment, away from this increasingly embarrassing situation.

"All right," he said and gave her a last up-and-down look.

Keira watched as he stepped into the street and hailed a taxi. He held the door open, helped her inside and handed over her packages.

"Here," he said and gave her a business card as well. "Call me if you need help."

*Why would I need your help?* She thought.

Keira took the card without looking at it. As the taxi pulled away, she laid her head back, closed her eyes, and let out a shuddering sigh. She only noticed the card still clenched in her hand when the driver stopped in front of the apartment building.

*Marco Santana, MD: Santana Enterprises.* And a telephone number.

She rumpled up the card, put it in her coat pocket, and forgot about it.

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Marco waited for the taxi to leave, then slowly scanned the area. A Watcher stood in the shadows of a book shop's entrance a few metres down the road.

The two men stared at each other for a long time before the Watcher shrugged and walked away.

Marco gave a hand signal to the other members of his team, ordering them to stand down. They couldn't risk a

battle in the street. He took his mobile phone out and dialled a number.

"You were right," he said when Victoria answered. "They are getting more blatant. They attempted an attack on her in a busy street and in broad daylight."

"Is she all right? Was anyone hurt?"

"She is fine. No one got hurt. I put her in a taxi, she is on her way home. And don't worry, the taxi is being followed and a team is in place at the apartment."

"Good." Victoria rang off.

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Victoria sat in her study and stared at the phone. She looked up at her assistant, Simone, who sat across from her, notebook on her crossed knee and pen poised.

"Call each Council member. This cannot be delayed any longer. I am convening the meeting this coming week."

Simone nodded, scribbled a few notes, and left the study.

Victoria pinched the bridge of her nose between forefinger and thumb, trying to focus on the task at hand.

*I should have told her a long time ago.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The Watcher reached his destination and took out his mobile phone. He hesitated to dial the number, but knew a report was expected. They didn't pay him enough for this.

"Yes?" a voice answered.

"Sir, we were unsuccessful. The car was ready, everyone was in place, but we couldn't grab her."

"Yes?"

"Sir, Marco Santana—he interfered. We didn't know he was following her. We could have taken him alone, but he had a full team of the Draaken as backup."

The silence on the other side was more threatening than any words. A soft click told the Watcher that he'd been disconnected.

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"Hey girlfriend!" Sammy called when Keira entered the apartment and closed the door behind her with a grateful sigh.

"Hey! You're finally up," Keira said and threw her shopping bags on a chair. She kicked her shoes off and sat down on the couch next to Sammy. The other girl was still in her bright yellow PJs and wore a very grumpy scowl to go with her sleep-tussled curls.

"Yeah, could have done with a few more winks, but the bloody phone woke me up," Sammy grumbled. "Coffee?"

"No thanks, I had some at Harrods."

"Must have been a madhouse. You won't catch me dead in that place on a Saturday."

"I know, but I had to get a gift for tomorrow."

"Find something?"

"A scarf and her favourite perfume," Keira grimaced as she stretched her right leg out and inspected the graze on her knee.

"Ouch, what happened?" Sammy asked and leaned closer.

"Oh—nothing—this guy bumped into me outside the shop."

"The bloody idiot. I hope you gave him a piece of your mind!"

Keira laughed at her friend. "No, Sammy, I didn't. It was an accident and he very politely helped me up. He even offered to bring me home in his car."

"You didn't—"

"No, I took a taxi. I wouldn't let some stranger know where I live!"

“Well, that depends. What did he look like?”

“Sammy!”

“What?” Sammy pretended to be insulted. “He may have done it on purpose, you know.”

“Now why the hell would he have done that?” Keira asked.

Sammy just shook her head and looked at her friend where she sat curled up on the couch. Keira’s green eyes sparkled with amusement and her long black hair fell to one side over her shoulder. Her soft cashmere sweater and short black skirt hugged her figure in all the right places.

“Never mind,” she gave a loud, exaggerated sigh. “You continue living on your special little planet. But you haven’t said, was he at least something to look at?”

Keira didn’t answer immediately. She thought and bit her lip. “It was so fast. He was quite tall, dark hair, blue eyes.”

“Tall, dark and handsome!” Sammy cried. “Please tell me you got his number?”

“Well, he gave me his card. I had it somewhere—”

Sammy groaned and rolled her eyes. “You are hopeless!”

“By the way, who called earlier?” Keira smiled and tried to change the subject. “It wasn’t my mother, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t your mother. It was a detective, thanks for reminding me.”

“Why would the police be calling here?” Keira frowned.

“Because they tracked us down from the club last night. They spoke to the owner and he gave them the guest list, since it was a private party. Some guy was attacked a block or two away and they’re following up, wanting to find out if we saw anything.”

Keira carefully folded her hands on her lap. “Really? What guy?” she asked, trying to sound casual and unconcerned.

“Just some guy. He’d apparently gate-crashed the party and was kicked out when someone realised he wasn’t on the

guest list. He was found in an alley nearby. The detective said the man was very confused, kept on jabbering about being attacked, seeing monsters and stuff,” Sammy laughed. “If you ask me, he was high on something.”

“Yeah, that was probably it,” Keira tried to smile.

“Oh, and he also asked for your and Alison’s mobile numbers. He’ll probably call later and ask you the same things, when did you leave, did you see anything unusual, that kind of stuff. You don’t mind, do you?” Sammy asked.

“No, of course not, why would I mind? I didn’t see anything unusual,” Keira squeezed the words through her tight throat. An ice-cold film of sweat broke out on her upper lip.

“Well, I’ve got to finish packing. My flight leaves early tomorrow morning,” Sammy said and stood up.

“Let me know if you need help,” Keira offered, still clenching her hands together on her lap.

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Marco watched the apartment block from his car, parked across the street. He’d arrived a few minutes after Keira’s taxi and had checked in with his team members to make sure no one else had followed her home. Satisfied with their report, he took over the guard duty as his team left. The hunt for Daemon’s Watchers was on and they were needed elsewhere.

## Chapter 7

A knock sounded at the front door at eleven in the morning, sharp. Keira opened it and smiled warmly. "Richard! What a nice surprise. How are you? Didn't my mother say that your nephew—Michael, isn't it—would fetch me?"

"Good morning Miss Keira, top of the morning to ye!" he greeted her with a cheery Irish brogue. "Och, Miss Keira, that laddie still has a lot to learn—a lot to learn. Been teaching him the ins and outs of it, been trying to get it done before I retire. But I cunna pass up the chance to come and collect my favourite lass." He winked at Keira.

"Ain't this pretty Sunday just the best for a family 'do'?" the old man rambled on as they left the building and he led Keira to the black Bentley waiting at the curb.

They were soon heading north-east on the A12 towards her family's estate near Colchester, as Richard filled Keira in on the Wilde Family news. She laughed at his comic description of her mother's hysterics over the trampling of her croquet lawn by the party planners and smiled with affection when she heard that her father had locked himself in his study to get away from the chaos.

Richard and his wife, Mary, lived in a cottage on the estate and had been working for the Wilde Family since Keira was a young girl. Keira used to spend many hours in Mary's warm kitchen with their fat ginger cat on her lap, listening to Mary telling stories of Ireland while the heavenly aroma of fresh-baked bread and rich stews filled the room. Richard and Mary didn't have children, and Keira never

asked why. It was a natural progression that their cottage became her second home.

Keira's mother believed that little girls should play inside, with dolls and doll houses and tiny little tea sets, not outside in germs and mud where wild animals lurked. And Mary had always been a willing accomplice in hiding her from the unending stream of nannies who were appointed to raise her into a lady.

It was Mary who taught her the old names for the woods folk, never dreaming that Keira would go out and call the foxes, squirrels, and deer to her and greet them by their proper names. And it was Richard who dried her tears when he delivered her back at St. Catherine's after a school holiday, encouraging her to 'keep yer chin up, that's a good lass!'

Richard's cheerful chatter didn't fool Keira one bit as she caught his concerned looks in the rear-view mirror. She gave him her best reassuring smile.

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Keira took a deep, steadying breath as they drew up to the tall, black wrought-iron gates that marked the entrance to her parents' estate.

*Get a grip, she thought. You're not a stuttering little girl anymore.*

She massaged her temples with her fingertips. "Are you all right, lass?" Richard asked and looked back at her.

"Yes, thanks. Just a bit of a headache."

"Och, too many late nights, then?" he winked at her.

"Something like that," Keira smiled.

Richard punched a code onto the number pad of a small security box. They waited for the gates to slowly swing open and then the Bentley was crunching its way up the long gravel drive. They drove underneath age old beech trees and past wooden rail-fences which enclosed acres of verdant



green pasture. In the distance, the pasture gave way to meadows filled with purple lavender and, even further, the woods beckoned.

Those woods, with their cool glades, were a refuge to Keira as a child. She remembered the many blissful hours she spent there, roaming as free as the wind, her constant companion.

It was there, in those secret, shadowy hideaways, that Keira had so many adventures; where she learned the whispered language of the trees and the soft bubbling laughter of the stream. Where she first spoke to Nagwa, who taught her so much and made her feel less alone.

Her parents had dismissed her childish babbles to the birds and pets around the house as ‘baby talk’ so it was only after Keira had started at boarding school at the age of six, that she realised how different from the other little girls she truly was.

She remembered coming home for Easter Holiday, after that disastrous term at boarding school. She had run to the woods as soon as she could escape from the house, frantic to find Nagwa. She hadn’t seen him since she had sent him home from school, begging him to go away so that he would be safe.

She had sobbed with relief when she found him waiting and spent hours reassuring herself that he was all right. That event had taught her that people always judge what they cannot explain, and that it was safer to be silent about what she could do.

“Here we are lass!” Richard said, bringing her back to the present as he stopped the car next to the ornamental white-marble fountain in front of the house.

“Thank you, Richard. Please tell Mary I’ll come and say hallo as soon as I can get away.”

“Not to worry, not to worry,” Richard smiled. “She’ll be busy in the kitchen the whole day, running around and making sure everything’s perfect. You take care of family

business first, then come over for a cuppa when things have calmed down.”

“I will. See you later!” she stepped out onto the gravel and waved as Richard pulled away to park the car in the converted mews, out of sight behind a green hedgerow.

She took a moment to take in the sight of her familial home and breathe in the fresh country air. Keira’s father was a third-generation Wilde who lived in the imposing, double-storey manse. Weathered red bricks and tall chimney stacks rising from the steep, clay-tiled roof, gave the building an air of understated elegance. Tall bay windows overlooked the gardens and glittered in the morning sun.

Keira walked slowly up the wide flagstone steps to the front door. She had last seen her parents a couple of weeks ago at St. Catherine’s Graduation Day. Her mother wasn’t impressed with the fact that she didn’t immediately come home and would no doubt bring this fact up several times during the hours ahead, along with all of Keira’s other characteristics she felt didn’t measure up to the family name. Included on that list of shortcomings was the fact that she had refused to have a debutante’s ball. It was not going to be fun.

As desperately as Keira wanted to miss the whole day, she couldn’t. Not only was it her parents’ thirtieth wedding anniversary, it was also her mother’s sixtieth birthday.

The door opened before she could knock and an unfamiliar maid stepped out to welcome Keira.

*Mother probably fired the last one again,* she thought, moving into the cool, white hall.

Huge flower arrangements flaunted their beauty and scent everywhere. The chandelier sparkled and the curving oak Tudor staircase gleamed in the light that poured through the windows. The house held few happy memories for Keira, but she could still appreciate its elegance. Her mother’s impeccable taste was evident from the interior décor, being stylish without being pretentious.

An arched doorway to her right led to the formal sitting room, channelling the sound of people talking and her mother's high girlish laugh towards Keira.

"Okay, here we go." She squared her shoulders and walked into the sitting room.

"Keira! Darling!" Cylvia Wilde gushed. She held her arms open as she walked to Keira. Her white silk blouse and classic charcoal trousers provided the perfect look for her slender figure. A double row of Tahitian black pearls glowed lustroously at her neck. Mother and daughter shared the same fine bone structure, but where Keira was a natural brunette, Cylvia was all high-lighted blonde.

Keira hugged her mother and was careful, as always, not to disturb her coiffed hair or smudge her makeup. Cylvia looked Keira up and down with an eagle's eye and nodded with approval.

"Turquoise suits you, Keira. Is that a new dress?"

"Thanks, Mother. My friend, Sammy, made it for me."

"Really—" Cylvia raised an eyebrow and Keira hastily continued before her mother could say anything. "Happy birthday, and happy anniversary." Cylvia took the carefully wrapped gift from Keira and put it on a nearby table without a glance at it.

*There goes a day of needless shopping,* Keira thought.

"Thank you, darling. But tell me, how are you? I have just told your father, it takes a momentous occasion to get you to come and visit us. Doesn't it?" Cylvia said as she turned around and addressed the question to her husband.

Steven ambled closer and smiled at his daughter. He hooked his forefinger into the collar of his buttoned-up, bow-tied shirt and tried to pull it looser around his Adam's apple.

"Hallo, Princess," he rumbled.

Keira tried not to cringe at his endearment and gave him a quick hug. She could smell the familiar Old Spice aftershave he still used. She was surprised that her mother had wangled her father into a suit; even to the office he

would only wear his soft, tweed coats. She sometimes thought he looked more like a college professor than one of London's top architects.

"Never mind, Cylvia. Our girl deserves some time off after twelve years of school," he rumbled.

"Hmm," Cylvia said with arched eyebrows. "As long as that time off is spent productively."

Keira's father drew her further into the room with his arm hooked through hers. "Come say hallo to Victoria. She's made it *very* clear she hasn't seen you in months."

"Now Steven, don't monopolise her. We still have to discuss college!" Cylvia called after her husband's retreating back.

"Yes, dear," he winked at Keira. "Don't worry about that now, Princess. Today is for family. We'll talk about it later."

Smiling together like two conspirators, they walked to the other side of the room and joined a circle standing by the marble fireplace. On the chaise lounge, more regal than any queen in Europe, sat Aunt Victoria. Keira couldn't help but grin at the sight of her beloved aunt. She was holding court, as usual, and directed the minions around her to fetch and carry champagne and canapés. She sat with a ramrod straight back, her silver-grey hair immaculately done in a chignon, her face expertly made up, and wearing a classic, powder-blue Chanel suit.

"Well, well, if it isn't the prodigal daughter returned to the fold," Aunt Victoria said sternly, her twinkling eyes belying the tone of her voice. Keira bent down and gave her a hug. "Come, sit," Victoria demanded and patted the seat next to her.

The older woman dismissed her admirers with a regal wave. When they were alone, she took Keira's hand in her own. "So, what is this I hear about college?"

Keira cleared her throat. She didn't know what Aunt Victoria would think of her desire to travel the world, and

she didn't want to get into a long discussion about it right now.

"Well?" Victoria asked.

"I don't want to go," Keira blurted out, then held her breath, waiting for the fall-out to come. Her aunt sat patiently, waiting for her to continue.

"I mean, it's not as if I'm never gonna go, it's just not the right time. I want to travel—see the world. Maybe take some photos and write some articles along the way."

Victoria gave a small smile. "You have some adventurer's blood in you, my dear."

"Yeah, well—a big, fat lot of good that's doing me right now. Being an adventurer is not exactly encouraged in this family. It's all about going to college, getting that job—"

Victoria patted Keira's knee. "Let's talk about this a bit later, my dear. You might be surprised at the opportunities available to you and the things which are expected of young people in this family."

Ignoring Keira's questioning look, Victoria changed the subject. "No young man on the horizon, then? You know, when I was your age," and she rattled on into the long speech that Keira knew so well.

Aunt Vic (as only a few favourite family members were allowed to call her) inherited a sizeable fortune from her first husband when he died tragically young. She never remarried, invested shrewdly, and today she was fabulously wealthy and didn't let anyone forget it. Which was, no doubt, why so many of the younger cousins grouped around her, taking her orders with patient smiles, hoping to inherit from the old lady who never had children of her own. They might have a long wait; she looked more energetic than all of them put together.

While listening with one ear, Keira took the opportunity to look around the room. She noticed relatives she hadn't seen in years and there were many new faces, probably the partners of cousins who had gotten married. But she

couldn't be sure. She had missed so many family weddings and christenings while she was away at boarding school, she had no idea who belonged with whom. A few small children played tag among the grown-ups' legs and more people arrived all the time.

Outside, a magnificent white marquee waited in the back garden and soft music drifted from it, in through the open windows.

"Ah, here you are. What kept you?" Aunt Vic's sharp question focused Keira's distracted thoughts. Her breath disappeared as she looked up into the same blue eyes she'd seen yesterday in the street in front of Harrods.

"My apologies, matters needed my attention," Marco smiled and bent over Victoria's hand to kiss it.

"Well then, Keira, let me introduce you to Marco Santana. He is visiting from Argentina. We have certain business interests in common."

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Marco said as he next bent over Keira's hand, brushing his lips over her skin.

"How—what are you doing here?" she asked, shocked at the unexpectedness of seeing him again. It took a few moments for her to realise that he was still holding on to her hand and she pulled it away with an embarrassed frown.

"Victoria invited me," he said.

"You know that is not what I mean! Yesterday—"

"I was shopping for a present for your mother, bumped into you, and now here I am," he answered patiently. "How is your knee?"

"Your knee? What about your knee?" Victoria interrupted.

"It is fine, just a scrape," Keira tried to reassure her Aunt.

"Hmph," the old lady muttered and gave Marco a sharp glance. "Didn't bother to dress for the occasion, I see," she said. His white, buttoned shirt and blue jeans stood in stark contrast to the sea of suits and ties surrounding them.

He merely laughed and pulled Keira up by the hand he had recaptured. He offered his other arm to Victoria and replied, "I hear the orchestra has started. May I escort you to your table?"

Keira had no choice but to walk with her aunt and the man who seemed so annoyingly sure of himself. With a determined smile, she tried to ignore the warmth of his arm under her hand, as well as the insistent little voice whispering in the back of her mind that this was too much of a coincidence.

Under the marquee, round tables were laid out with crystal and silver. White porcelain plates gleamed on cream lace table cloths and white flowers flowed from glass vases. Fairy lights hung from the roof and covered the scene in a warm glow. In a far corner, a small orchestra sat on a dais, softly playing classical music.

Marco pulled a chair out for Victoria, then for Keira, and took his place between the two women. Soon, all the guests were seated and the speeches started. Keira listened absent-mindedly, smiled at all the right places, raised her glass in a toast, and clapped with the others when she had to.

The headache that had been threatening since early that morning, finally announced its presence with savage pleasure. All the clamour of people laughing and clinking champagne glasses merged into a loud, unidentifiable buzz which throbbed through Keira's head.

As soon as she could politely excuse herself, she got up from the table and walked quickly back to the house. She ran up the wide staircase to the second floor, stumbled into her mother's room and rummaged through the dresser's drawers, looking for aspirin or anything that would help dull the headache. She found a couple of pills and swallowed them dry.

Keira closed her eyes and held her hand over her forehead. She stood like that for a few moments, waiting for the pain to fade away.

"Are you okay?" The voice behind her made Keira jump. She twisted around, stumbled and fell into Marco's arms for the second time in twenty-four hours. He grabbed her by the elbows and pulled her against his body to steady her.

"What are you doing here!" She had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

"You seemed ill when you left the table; I wanted to make sure you were all right," he said. His eyes caressed her face in a way that belied his clipped tone, making Keira's cheeks burn. She freed herself from his touch and stepped back.

"I'm fine. You can go back to the party."

"Really?" He lifted a sardonic eyebrow. Here was a man not used to being dismissed. He took a step closer to her.

"Keira, darling, are you in here?" Cylvia called from the staircase, interrupting whatever he was going to say.

"Oh damn, my mother!" Keira whispered, desperately looking around for a place to hide.

"In here, quick!" He took her arm and pulled her towards a walk-in closet. He pushed her inside and shut the door behind them. The narrow room overflowed with Cylvia's designer outfits. Ball gowns, fur coats, and suits were crammed into every space.

On the other side of the door, Cylvia was talking to herself. "I was sure I heard voices up here," she murmured. "Hmm, where did I put that face powder."

Keira stood frozen, listening to her mother rummaging through drawers. She stood with her back against a rail full of dresses; Marco still had his hand on her arm.

She wanted to hiss at him to move away, but didn't dare make a sound with her mother standing outside the door. She had to be satisfied with crossing her arms and scowling silently.

He slowly bent forward and whispered in her ear, "Am I annoying you?"



His warm breath caused delicious tingles to run up and down her spine. She bit on her lip and tried very hard to blank him out.

She was getting angrier by the second, with herself and, even more so, with Marco.

*What the hell is going on with you, Keira? Two days ago you nearly killed a man for touching you, and here you are acting like a—a—hormonal idiot,* a prim Keira voice scolded.

*This is so completely different—*, a dreamy Keira voice answered.

*Oh, this is just great. Now I've got multiple personality disorder,* Keira thought and clamped down on the voices.

Glaring at Marco, her eyes caught on a small scar that started in the corner of his mouth and ran down into the cleft of his chin. His was a face used to the elements; his slightly crooked nose had obviously survived a brawl or two. His dark hair was cut short, no need for expensive hair gel there, and very different from the young men Keira was used to with their soft white skins and artfully done hair.

Just then, Keira heard Sylvia leave the room. She shoved Marco back and fled. She only stopped long enough at the top of the staircase to pull herself together and watch her mother walk through the patio doors to the marquee outside. Once collected, she followed at a more sedate pace.

Back at the table, Victoria eyed Keira's flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair and interrogated her as soon as she sat down.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks, Aunt Vic—a slight headache, that's all."

"Hmm," Victoria took a sip of her champagne, then changed the subject. "You haven't told me yet, how are your charming friends, Sammy and Alison?"

"They are fine, thanks," Keira replied and took a gulp of water. She didn't want to tell her aunt she was staying in the city by herself.

“Good. So you’ve got a couple more weeks free until you have to decide what you’re going to do about your future?”

“Yes. I—we’re just hanging around, you know, enjoying the free time,” Keira answered.

“Good,” Victoria said again. She had a knowing glint in her eyes that made Keira feel oddly paranoid.

At that moment, Marco entered the tent and took his seat next to Keira. She tensed, turned her back to him and started a stilted conversation with an old, hard-of-hearing gentleman on her other side.

Keira spent the rest of that long, miserable afternoon smiling politely at stories of new babies, new marriages, divorces, and deaths. At one point she thought if she had to hear about one more bloody birth epic, or another long-suffering deathbed saga, she would lose her mind. Scolding herself for being insensitive and inconsiderate didn’t help at all.

She tried her damndest to avoid all the curious, sometimes well-meaning and sometimes not, questions about her plans for the future, her love-life or the lack thereof. Unfortunately she couldn’t escape her cousin, Giselle, who stopped by Keira’s table to introduce her fiancé. She made a point of mentioning that he had just graduated from Cambridge and would interview for a position at Keira’s father’s firm. She touched her hair and forehead an absurd number of times, flashing her blingy diamond ring for all to see.

Keira gritted out her congratulations and well wishes, all the while conscious of Marco’s eyes following her every move. His gaze burned on the back of her neck, causing her to flush hot and cold in turn. He didn’t try to talk to her again, and Keira didn’t know if she should be grateful or annoyed.

Eventually she managed to extract herself from the party. She said goodbye to her parents and Aunt Vic and made countless promises to visit more often. She pointedly

ignored Marco. Before leaving, she went to greet Mary in the kitchen. No time for a visit today: she got a quick hug, then the bustling, flushed little woman was off again haranguing the waiters.

Sinking gratefully into the backseat of the Bentley Richard had waiting for her, Keira closed her eyes in exhaustion as they retreated down the drive.

## Chapter 8

Keira spent the next two days roaming London's streets with her camera as her only companion. The viewfinder became the filter through which she viewed her surroundings and it kept her mind off of matters best forgotten; matters such as terror-filled faces, demanding parents, and hypnotic blue eyes. She walked until exhaustion forced her back to the apartment where she spent the evenings downloading photos to her laptop, editing her portfolio, and dreaming about National Geographic glory.

On the third morning, the shrill ringing of the apartment's doorbell interrupted her preparations for another day of exploring. Opening the door with the security chain still fastened, she peeked at the person standing on the other side.

"Miss Keira Wilde?"

"Yes?"

"Good morning, Miss Wilde. I'm Detective Constable Paul Samuels, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" The policeman handed his warrant card through the narrow space and waited for her reply.

Still thinking about the day ahead and the areas she wanted to visit, Keira could for the moment not think why a policeman would want to speak to her. Then, with a shock running through her like an ice-cold lightning flash, she remembered.

In an even, tightly controlled voice, she asked the policeman to wait a moment. She closed the door, slid the

security chain off and opened it again. A tall man in plain clothes smiled at her.

"Hallo," Keira said. "I'm sorry, but I'm actually on my way out."

"That's all right; I don't expect to be long. This is a routine investigation," he said.

"How can I help you?" Keira arranged her face in a blank, enquiring expression.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "Your friend, Miss Samantha Knight, informed us that you were attending a party at a club called Poison Ivy on Friday evening, correct?"

"Yes?"

"At what time did you leave the club?"

"It was about midnight, if I remember correctly."

"Was there anyone with you at that time?"

"No, I left on my own."

"How did you get home, Miss Wilde?"

"I called for a taxi, which never arrived, so I walked to the Underground and took the train."

"Did you, at any time, see anything out of the ordinary or hear any strange noises?"

Keira shrugged and asked, "Such as what exactly, Detective?"

"Such as screams for help, sounds of a scuffle, that kind of thing. Also—well—green lights, a tornado—"

"Excuse me Detective, but 'a tornado?'" Keira raised her eyebrows.

He looked embarrassed and gave a small laugh. "Yes, well, we had a statement from a man who was found wandering around the area. He claims to have been attacked by a crazy woman, said there were green lights—" the Detective's voice trailed off.

"Okay, well, just following procedure and trying to find any witnesses. Thank you for your time." He cleared his throat again. "Here is my card, if you think of anything, please give me a call."

“Sure, I’ll do that,” Keira said and watched as the Detective walked to the elevator.

She slowly closed the apartment’s door and slid the chain back with shaking hands. She took a few trembling steps to a chair against the near wall and fell into it. Keira dropped her head down onto her knees and exhaled in relief. For the first time in days, the tight coil lodged in her midriff started to unwind.

The next moment she jerked upright as her mobile phone rang in her pocket. “Hallo?” she answered, nearly dropping it in her haste to answer.

“Good morning, Keira. Are you busy?”

“Aunt Vic, hallo. No, I’m not busy. Is everything all right?” Keira asked, slightly concerned. Victoria usually got her assistant, Simone, to phone for her, citing her dislike of all things ‘new fangled and technological.’

“Everything is fine, why wouldn’t it be?” Victoria answered.

“Well, it’s just that—oh, never mind. It’s nice to hear your voice. What are you up to?” Keira smiled and sat back in the chair.

Victoria got straight to the point. “I have a proposition for you. I am going to Europe for a few days and I want you to accompany me. I have to check on one of my estates. It’s a bit remote, on the border between the Czech Republic and Germany, and needs some renovation work. I would appreciate you taking photos of the buildings so I can discuss exactly what I want done with the contractors once we get back. What do you say?”

“Oh,” Keira said, taken aback by the sudden invitation. She loved Aunt Vic to bits, but had never before been asked to go anywhere with her. She wasn’t even aware that Victoria knew about her photography. She was also sure that Victoria could have any professional photographer she wanted for this assignment. But suddenly, the idea of a few days on a remote estate in Europe seemed like total bliss.

The past week has been an emotional roller coaster and Keira was ready to get off.

"It sounds lovely, Aunt Vic, but I can't say for sure yet. I'll have to discuss this with my parents first."

"I've already done that and they've given their blessing. Well, that's settled then. My car will pick you up at the apartment tomorrow morning at nine. My plane leaves at eleven. Don't be late."

"Aunt Vic—" Keira stammered, but Victoria had already rung off and left Keira staring at the dead handset. "Well, isn't that typical," she said.

The rest of the day was spent in a mad rush of packing clothes and equipment, charging camera batteries, arranging with the doorman to water the plants, and leaving messages for her friends to tell them she'd be gone for a few days.

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London was painted in dusk's pastel oranges and reds, the light slowly retreating and shadows advancing, when Simone entered Victoria's office and asked if she required anything else for the day.

"No, thank you, Simone. I'll see you tomorrow," Victoria said. Her assistant gave her a respectful nod and left the room.

She swivelled her chair back to the window and stared out at the darkening sky. It had been thirteen years, almost to the day, since she first realised Keira's destiny.

*I should have told her so much sooner. Well, better late than never. She's strong enough to do this.*

For many generations, Victoria had watched each crop of young fools in the Wilde Family grow up into older fools, sometimes sensing a promising flicker of magick, more often not.

Those few children whose gift shone bright and true, were invited to attend the Initiates' School and they became part of the inner circle. They became Guardians of that which connects all things in this dimension and the next: the Akasha.

And it was not only the Wildes. All around the world, the allied Families would nurture their magickal children and when they were ready, send them to the Initiates' School to be trained in the way of the Guardians.

Once graduated, a handful of the best candidates would be selected and sent to Victoria for further training. Not everyone managed to reach her high expectations, but those who did, joined the Draaken, the elite warriors and magickae tasked with keeping the Guardians safe. When a seat on the Council fell vacant, members of the Draaken were eligible to fill it.

Despite all those Victoria trained as Guardians, Draaken, and even members of Council, her job was not complete. She kept searching for that one child in whom the pure flame of magick burnt with a hot intensity that would not be extinguished by anything or anyone. The girl who would become the next High Priestess.

Thirteen years ago, Victoria finally found that child. At first she could hardly believe it. Could she hope that the search was finally over?

It was a Sunday afternoon. Victoria was visiting her great-great nephew and his wife. A day wasted, she was sure. A year before, at a family wedding, she thought she caught a whisper of magick from their young daughter. Keira was five years old and would be sent off to boarding school the next year; if Victoria was going to meet the girl and get a proper sense of her abilities, she had to do it now. However, after an hour in the parents' company she was convinced that it would be completely impossible for those two, ignorant on a scale that defied comprehension, to have a child with even the slightest magickal potential.



She excused herself on the pretence of wanting to admire the gardens and went for a walk outside. By coincidence she saw the little girl sneak down the stone steps to the lower garden and race across the lawn towards the far trees. Victoria followed her out of curiosity. Unnoticed, she watched as the girl whispered to a black raven, which had flown down from a branch to perch on the small forearm she held out to him.

Victoria silently followed Keira and her companion as they went further into the trees. After a few moments, little woods folk appeared from the shadows to walk with the young girl. She was soon surrounded by twittering birds, several hares, two red foxes, and a mother doe and her young. Victoria heard Keira laugh and greet all the animals by name. She even called out to the wind and the trees, both of which answered her with friendly sighs and whispers.

Such a fierce joy overwhelmed Victoria that she had to sit down on a log to rest her trembling legs. "A child of such natural ability—at last!" she exulted.

As tempted as Victoria was to sweep the girl up in her arms and carry her far from that oppressive house, the child's safety came first. Keira would survive longer if as few people as possible knew of her existence.

Over the next few years, Victoria kept a very close eye on Keira's doings. The parents, completely in awe of 'Aunt Victoria' and her rumoured 'bottomless pit of wealth,' were flattered by the attention and invited her to every birthday party and family event. In time, Victoria became an integral part of Keira's life, the doting aunt who was always there with a word of advice for anything and everything.

To Victoria's unending relief, Keira's magick survived the onslaught of puberty. But by then, Daemons' threat had grown so as to make Victoria believe that it would be safer to keep Keira hidden from the magickael world which had suddenly become very violent.

The shifting light outside her window cast Victoria's face in shadow. The time had come to reveal Keira's destiny to her. For the first time in her life, Victoria was scared.

## Chapter 9

Keira sat in her aunt's private plane, sipping a glass of mineral water and picking at the dainty sandwiches a smiling crew member in an impeccable uniform, put before her. Outside the porthole window, between wispy clouds, she caught an occasional glimpse of the stone-grey North Sea far below them as they flew east towards Germany.

Victoria sat opposite her, reading documents from a thick file Simone had handed her as they boarded. Keira didn't want to interrupt.

Simone sat with her back to the two women, a few seats away, busily typing on a laptop.

Victoria frowned, it didn't seem as if the file contained good news. Then she sighed and looked up. "I apologise, Keira. I am not good company right now."

"It's all right, Aunt Vic," Keira smiled. "It must be a full-time job keeping up with all your business interests."

"It is not only the businesses, Keira. There are so many other things—" Victoria hesitated, looking at the documents on her lap.

"Is it the estate? I didn't even know that you owned an estate in Europe. How long have you had it? Does it need a lot of work?" Keira asked, hoping to distract her aunt from whatever was weighing on her mind.

"It has been in our family for hundreds of years," her aunt replied.

"I'm sorry, did you say hundreds of years?"

"Yes, and it is only one of the many things I have to tell you, Keira. It is perhaps the simplest, so let's start with that.

If all goes to plan in the next few days, it will pass into your care very soon.”

Keira’s eyes widened and she blinked.

Victoria tried again. “Let me start over. The Wilde Family is old, Keira; so much older than you can imagine. Over the centuries, the family name has changed a few times, but the bloodline remains. The estate we are going to has been in the family since before Julius Caesar became the Dictator of Rome, and it has always been in the care of one very specific person. During the past few decades, that person has been me.”

Keira was silent for a moment and then asked, “And you hoped the next person would be me? Why me? I mean—I’ve only just finished school, surely there is someone more qualified?”

Victoria smiled. “As always you go straight to the point. Unfortunately Keira, that is exactly where things get difficult.”

“What do you mean ‘difficult?’ Is everything all right?”

“Yes, and no. Actually, I’ve been putting this off, but I have no choice anymore. I have to tell you something, dear. Please try to keep an open mind.”

Keira leaned forward with increasing concern. She had never seen her Aunt this unsettled before. Victoria had always seemed so calm and collected, ready to face whatever the world threw at her.

Victoria looked out of the window, then back at Keira. “I had hoped to lead you to this slowly, but now—I suppose there is no easy way to say this, so I’ll just get on with it.”

“I have been aware of what you could do since you were a very young girl. Unfortunately, so were my enemies. They couldn’t find you once you stopped using your magick, all those years ago. But recent events brought you to their attention again and now, to my everlasting regret, I’m afraid that I have underestimated them.” Victoria paused and looked at the young woman with a sad half-smile.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Vic, but I don't understand," Keira said, trying to ignore her growing fear.

"You are a magickal being, Keira. A very powerful one actually. And you are not alone. Many members of the Wilde Family have magickal abilities, including myself. We keep this hidden from the rest of the world, for reasons you will soon understand. I am the Leader of the magickal section of our family. There is also an International Council of Elders, of which I have been the Chairperson for a very long time. Too long."

Keira waited for her aunt to start laughing, or for someone to tell her the punch line of the joke, but it didn't come. Victoria looked at her with calm compassion.

"No—I'm not—what do you mean I'm—" Keira stammered, her knuckles white against the dark-blue upholstered armrests.

"Keira, please calm down. I don't have time to ease you into this gently. This is not a game, my child. We are in the middle of a war."

Keira was shocked into silence. The woman in front of her was a stranger. Her body carried an aura of contained power, her eyes were wells of ancient wisdom.

A fleeting memory washed over her, of herself as a young girl, standing in a glade near her home, arms outstretched and hair whirling in the wind. She was surrounded by small forest animals and Nagwa sat on her shoulder. Then came the more recent memory of power surging through her body as she defended herself in a London alley.

"I'm listening," Keira said and sat back in her chair.

Victoria nodded in approval and began again. "We are the Guardians of the Akasha."

"There is a name for this?" Keira asked. "I'm not just some—freak of nature?"

"Of course not," Victoria replied. "Everything in the universe has a name; a purpose. Everything is connected."

Akasha literally means ‘space,’ and that is what we do. Who we are. Everything around us, from the smallest atom to the biggest planet is connected through the Akasha. We see it, feel it and work with it.”

“What do you mean?” Keira asked.

“How do you call the wind?” Victoria asked in return.

Keira hesitated, she wasn’t even sure herself how she did it.

“And that is not the only thing you are able to do, is it? You can draw energy from your environment and use it to defend yourself. I bet it manifests as heat in your hands, doesn’t it?”

“How do you know this?” Keira whispered.

“I followed you one day, a long time ago. I saw you go into the woods and call the little folk and the wind to you. Your friend, the raven—”

“Nagwa,” Keira interrupted.

“Is that his name now?” Victoria smiled. “Well, initiates are able to manipulate the elements only after years of intensive training. You have been able to do it by yourself, since a very young age. And you also communicate with animals. It is rare members of the Families who manifest powers beyond the manipulation of space and energy, and those powers are different for each individual. We haven’t yet been able to explain why or how this happens.”

Keira closed her eyes; she had to remind herself to keep on breathing. She listened to Victoria explain how she had been protected and watched over, ever since she was a child.

Victoria spoke about the history of the Wilde Family and of her own role as their leader. Their lineage could be traced back for centuries.

“Wildes have rubbed shoulders with barbarian leaders and with kings; with empresses and prophets. We have fled persecution during the witch trials and joined the Holy Crusade. Through all of this, our High Priestesses have kept

a record of our history and built their knowledge to, above all, protect the Akasha against those who wish to use it for their own gain."

Victoria told Keira of all the other Families around the world who kept in touch with each other through the Council.

"Each of the Elders has specific responsibilities," Victoria explained. "Mine include training initiates who have been identified by the Families as having magickal abilities. They are sent from all over the world to a school at the castle, where we are going to now."

"A school? They get training?"

"Yes," Victoria said. She knew what was coming.

"How could you!" Keira shouted. "Why didn't you tell me? Do you have *any* idea the hell I've been through? Do you even know what it would have meant to me, to know that I'm not alone, to know that I belong somewhere, with people who are like me?" Her voice trembled as she strove to control her emotions.

In a rush, that sense of exclusion and complete aloneness returned. That feeling that haunted her throughout her childhood. She had known and accepted that she was different from her friends, that she could do things she couldn't even explain to herself. But she had been able to push that aside and concentrate on the job of being normal, always trying her damndest to fit in with society's expectations.

She looked over at Simone, who still sat typing. In the shock of Victoria's revelation, Keira had completely forgotten that they were not alone on the plane, but Simone gave no indication that she had heard their conversation.

"Even *she* knew?"

"Yes," Victoria admitted.

Keira's eyes brightened in sudden understanding. "Marco?" she asked.

“Yes. Believe me, Keira, there were times when I wanted to storm into that house and take you away to come live with me, but how would I explain that to your parents? If your mother saw what you could do, talking with animals, commanding the elements, she would have you committed with no qualms about it. Not to mention how much unwanted attention it would have focused on you from people you were better off not knowing about.”

Keira took a few deep, slow breaths, trying not to hyperventilate. She had to clear her mind and try to understand this, logically, analytically.

“You mentioned an International Council,” she said. “So, this is a worldwide thing?” She had difficulty imagining the scope of this secret. “What exactly do they do?”

“Yes, this is a ‘worldwide thing,’” Victoria nodded. “The Council’s role is, and has always been, to utilise the Families’ vast resources to ensure that the Akasha is kept safe.”

“Safe against what?” Keira asked.

“The question is not what, but whom. Keira, you have to understand that the world consists of many layers of existence. The general public knows only one of those layers—their immediate environment and that which they can touch, hear and see. Even when they do experience anything ‘strange,’ or anything that belies the general doctrine, they don’t believe their own senses. They prefer not having a light shone into the darker corners of the universe. They feel safe in their cocoons and are suspicious of anything that threatens their view of reality.”

“But it is not reality, is it?” Keira asked.

“No. But it is to them, and we want to keep it that way.”

“Why?”

“What do you think would happen if the masses find out that the Akasha, and therefore time itself, can be manipulated?” Victoria countered. “We are powerful, but we are a tiny minority in the general population. We would be



overrun. The world would be altered beyond understanding.”

“Time—it can be manipulated?” The enormity of the idea penetrated through the anger Keira had wrapped around herself.

“Yes, the knowledge exists to manipulate time. There is a record—a book—and it is one of the Guardians’ objectives to keep anyone from accessing the knowledge in that book and tampering with the Akasha. This is why we are facing a war. Only I never expected it would be with one of our own.”

“War?” Keira felt like a parrot.

“Yes. There is one who believes the Guardians should use their power to change history, to take their place as rulers of the world. Unfortunately his support has grown to the point where logic and reason no longer prevail.”

“Who is he?” Keira asked.

“His name is Daemon. He lobbied for years to have Council funds assigned to studying the Akasha and how it could be used for personal gain.” Victoria scoffed. “Oh, he was clever enough to not use those exact words. He tried to make it sound as if he’d be doing humanity a favour by altering time and changing a few historical events. That goes against everything the Guardians stand for. Who will be the one that decides what will be changed? Who will decide which child gets to be born—and which child does not?”

“He wants to be God.” Keira rubbed her arms where the gooseflesh had broken out.

“Yes, and I can assure you he will not be a loving or merciful God,” Victoria answered. “We were already funding research into the so-called metaphysical sciences, but Daemon wasn’t satisfied. He kept on pushing, manipulating, and attempting to intimidate Council members to support his cause. People who spoke against him disappeared, or suddenly, inexplicably, changed their beliefs and joined him.”

"Surely you could have done something, told the police and had him arrested?" Keira couldn't believe that in today's day and age, people could get away with such tactics.

"We did do something. We dispatched the Draaken. Daemon retaliated..." Victoria broke off.

"What happened?" Keira asked.

"We underestimated him, that's what happened. He struck at Draaken families. Loved ones were murdered. This time he made no secret of the fact that he was involved and that it would continue if we didn't back off. So we did, which was another mistake. We should have eliminated him when we had the chance."

"Aunt Vic!" Keira was shocked at her Aunt's casual reference to killing another human being.

"Well, that option is no longer available to us. He is too well protected, now. His support has grown to the point where they are threatening to overthrow the Council and take power. His arrogance knows no bounds. He has openly declared his intention to seize the Book of Knowledge, which will only happen over my dead body." Victoria's face reflected her grim determination.

"So, this is all about a book," Keira said.

"War is never so simple that it can be shrunk down to one single factor, Keira. However, it is one of the major reasons. This book has been under the protection of each successive High Priestess and each one of us has added our knowledge and experience to it. It contains everything from rituals for protection and for destruction to names of Guardians who have held some of the highest offices in governments around the world. It is our collective memory."

"It is a database," Keira said.

Victoria gave a rueful laugh. "I suppose so. But it is not stored on any mainframe known to man."

"And Daemon believes that if he could access this memory, he'd be able to manipulate time. Is the Book safe?"

"Yes. For now."

“Aunt Vic, why are we really going to Europe?”

“We are going to the castle, as I told you. But I have called a full Council meeting there on Saturday. Members are arriving as I speak. At this meeting, I will introduce you as my immediate successor as Leader of the Wilde Family. It is also my wish that you will stay and receive training, and eventually become the next High Priestess,” Victoria answered, her tone crisp and business-like.

“What? You can’t do that!”

“Why exactly not?”

“You don’t—you can’t—I don’t know what you are thinking! It is one thing to tell me I am part of some worldwide group, but to tell me I have to lead these people—fight a war—it’s insane! You don’t even know me. You don’t know who I am. You can’t make all these people depend on me. People get hurt when I use this—this magick.”

“Calm down!” Victoria’s voice whiplashed through the plane. Keira’s face froze in shock, but she got a grip of her emotions and closed her mouth.

“Keira, I don’t have time to repeat myself. I have told you about the Akasha—the connectedness between all things. But there is also the Void—the unconnectedness. Where the Akasha is matter, the Void is antimatter, endless nothingness. In the beginning, the Akasha and Void were one entity, until they were split apart during the Creation. For a very long time, however, the veil between the two entities was thin and those with enough power could enter the Akasha, or the Void, and return. Unfortunately, there are things in the Void—” Victoria paled and wiped her hand over her face.

“Aunt Vic?”

“Some of those foolish travellers were followed and when they slipped back into the Akasha, and into our dimension, things from the Void slipped through as well. It took the combined power of all the Guardians alive during those times to banish the beings back into the Void. It was

then that one of our ancestors, a High Priestess, managed to install a gate between the two entities. It is guarded by the Gatekeeper. This history is recorded in the Book of Knowledge. If Daemon gains possession of the Knowledge, he could banish his enemies into the Void, and invite other beings out. He would be unstoppable.”

Keira’s mouth had gone dry. “But surely that’s not possible?”

Victoria merely looked at her. “The Guardians will make sure it doesn’t happen, whether possible or not.”

“Aunt Vic, I mean no offence, but why wasn’t this book destroyed a long time ago? If it is so dangerous, why leave it lying around for Daemon to find?”

“First of all, it is not ‘lying around.’ It is in the most protected place I know of. Secondly, it contains our knowledge and our history. I think it is James Burke that said: ‘If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you are.’”

Victoria sighed in frustration. “If only I had more time with you—but I will give you what I can. Besides, the Draaken will be there as well. They will all help and protect you.”

Keira’s mind whirled with a million unanswered questions. Doomsday scenarios raced like movies on fast forward behind her eyes; faces of family, Alison and Sammy, appeared and disappeared. Images of Nagwa and the woods folk wavered and vanished.

*He would change time*, she thought. How many times did she wish she’d never been born? Would she be born if Daemon changed time? The thought of non-existence suddenly seemed less appealing.

“This is too much,” she shook her head.

Victoria leaned forward and took Keira’s hand in her own. “The one thing that I will regret for the rest of my life is that I didn’t come for you sooner. Please forgive me—”

She was interrupted when the pilot announced, “Ladies, we will be landing in fifteen minutes. Please stow away any bags or loose items and fasten your seatbelts. Thank you.”

“Keira, there is one more thing,” Victoria said. “You couldn’t have known, but every time someone uses magick, it causes a ripple in the Akasha. We call this a signature. Each Guardian’s signature is unique. Some of us—especially trained magickae—can identify individuals by their signatures. The other night, when you defended yourself against attack, I sensed your signature, which means Daemon did as well.”

“So he knows who I am?” Keira asked.

“He didn’t at first. You haven’t used your magick in many years, so your signature is relatively new. But judging by the strength of it, you are the only one alive today who equals Daemon in raw ability. He wouldn’t have failed to notice that.”

Victoria hesitated. “The attack in front of Harrods—”

“What?”

“Yes, his Watchers tried to attack you. Marco intervened.”

“Marco was following me?”

“Yes, on my orders.”

“Isn’t that grand,” Keira cried. “A few days ago I was stressing about hiding what I am from my friends and whether or not to go to college. Now, the greatest known evil of the modern world views *me* as a threat. That is just fabulous!”

“Don’t sulk, dearest,” Victoria smiled. “We’ve got time to prepare you, yet.”

The plane landed with a soft bump on a small, private airstrip, taxied for a short distance and came to a stop in front of a large, corrugated-iron aeroplane hangar. A silver Audi Q7 awaited them with its doors open. Simone got in the front passenger seat, while Keira and Victoria sat in the back. The driver politely closed their doors and soon they

were winding their way through miles of uninterrupted forest. Dark trees were the only witness to their passing.

## Chapter 10

Keira stared unseeingly out of the window. As strange as her childhood had been, nothing could have prepared her for this. She felt equal measures of resentment and gratitude to Victoria. Resentment for her not telling her the truth much, much earlier, and gratitude for knowing that she was not alone anymore, that there were other people like her.

Then there was a small part of her, wishing she could creep back into her little bubble of ignorance and shut the world out. There is a terrible beauty to isolation. You don't have to accept responsibility for others, or live up to their expectations. You could dip your toe into humanity's maelstrom from time to time, or sit on the river bank and observe. Keira had convinced herself she wanted to be part of that maelstrom; that she wanted to be a part of something bigger. It must have been a lie, because here she was, thrown head first into the torrent and she felt like she was drowning.

"We are here," her aunt announced.

For the first time, Keira took notice of her environment. The trees opened up to reveal a wide moat glistening like a silver snake, following the curvature of a medieval castle's boundary wall which rose at least thirty feet into the air.

The driver slowed down as they drove over a lowered drawbridge held in place by chains, each of its links as thick as Keira's waist. The chains lead up and disappeared into guard towers on top of the castle's wall. The car continued on through massive wooden gates, reinforced with iron bars and bolts.

When she looked back through the rear window, the drawbridge was being pulled up with a rattle and groan from the chains, and the gates closed behind them with a solid thud. The surreal setting brought Victoria's message home in a way her words couldn't.

*I am so far out of my league it's not even funny,* Keira thought.

The car stopped in a big cobblestone courtyard. The driver opened Victoria's door and Keira slid over the seat to join her aunt and Simone outside. She stood next to the car for a moment and turned in a slow circle, taking in the building surrounding her on all sides.

She couldn't begin to guess how old the castle was, but it had that unmistakable weathered look of a fortress that had withstood many centuries. Saw-toothed battlements and evenly spaced guard towers topped the wall, bearing testament to the fact that this castle was built to withstand a war.

Even in her current state, Keira could admire and appreciate the work of the artists who created this medieval masterpiece.

The sound of Simone's low laughter made her turn to the small group a few feet away from the car.

"You remember Marco?" her aunt asked.

"Yes, of course." Keira tried to hide her chagrin at his presence. He was dressed, again, in Levi jeans that hung at just the right spot on his hips, a white shirt unbuttoned to show a hint of tanned skin at his throat and shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal smooth, strong forearms.

He stepped closer, his eyes flashing blue as he took the hand that she had automatically extended to him. Their skin barely touched when Keira jerked her fingers back and took a firmer grip on her shoulder bag.

"Well then, let's go inside," Victoria commanded.

Keira followed as Marco led them up the steps of the main castle keep. The tall front door swung open and she



had to narrow her eyes as the sun glinted off the brass scales of a dragon set in a panel on the door. For a moment it seemed as if its sinuous form twisted and its huge jaws stretched even wider, then she stepped into the darker interior of the building and she had to blink her eyes a few times to adjust it to the change in light.

They walked into a great hall. A wide expanse of stone floor was partly covered by rugs woven in rich hues of amber, burgundy, and terracotta. Brown leather couches were arranged at the far side of the hall, in front of a fireplace that took up most of the wall. Thick logs burned and gave off enough heat to warm the cavernous space. All around them, embroidered family crests hung from the high ceiling criss-crossed by a web of black wooden support beams. Keira recognised the Wilde family crest, hanging prominently above the fireplace.

To their left, a wide staircase curved to the higher levels of the castle, and it was in this direction that Victoria steered her.

"The living quarters are this way, Keira," Victoria explained. "Now where is that little—"

"Hallo, hallo, so you arrived then, sorry I'm a bit late. Been out playing with the pups," a cheerful voice interrupted her.

A young boy had run up to their side, out of breath and grinning at Victoria's frown. His brown eyes twinkled merrily in his freckled face and tousled black hair stood out in every direction.

"Well, better late than never!" Victoria pretended to scowl. "Keira, this is Justin. One of our younger initiates and general nuisance to all."

"Aunt Vic!" he howled with a hurt expression.

"There, there, no need to make such a racket!" she shushed him. "Take Keira's bag to her room, then you can come back and give me a full report on Ylva's pups," Victoria winked at the boy.

“Keira, why don’t you go freshen up. We’ll meet back here for dinner,” Victoria said and waved Keira and Justin off in the direction of the stairs. She made sure that they were out of earshot before she turned to Marco.

“Have any of the Council members arrived yet?” she asked.

“Only Mr Savelli. And the observer from Japan you invited, Mr Harigaya. The rest of the Council members will arrive tomorrow. That is, except the Moreaux representative. They’ve sent a message informing me that they withdraw from Council,” Marco replied.

“Ha! Those cowards. They didn’t even have the decency to come and tell us themselves.” Victoria gave an unladylike snort of derision. “Have they joined forces with Daemon?”

“Sebastian is in France and is investigating, but it would seem so,” Marco agreed. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if they did. They’ve been sitting on the fence for a while now. Well, at least we know who our friends are—and who aren’t.” Victoria was lost in thought for a moment as she took count of the allies they had left. “Are the Draaken in place?”

“Yes, they are. Victoria—” Marco hesitated.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Chloe has reported an unusual lack of activity surrounding Daemon’s location in New York.”

“Don’t let that fool you. He is planning his next move,” Victoria said. “He will know that the Council is meeting here the day after tomorrow. If his intelligence sources are any good, and I suspect they are, he would know by now that Keira is the source of the power surge in London, also that I have brought her here, which clearly broadcasts my intentions.” Victoria frowned, “That can’t be helped though, the time for secrecy is over. War is upon us.”

“I have increased security around the perimeter,” Marco nodded.

“Good. Although Daemon would be a fool to attack us here,” Victoria said.

## Chapter 11

Justin brought Keira to her room, all the while chattering about Ylva's new litter and asking hundreds of questions, without waiting for the answers.

"You will love the pups, they are so cool. They're just beginning to play—but you have to be careful, their teeth are super sharp. But don't worry, Ylva keeps them in line, she won't let them hurt a human, unless of course you try to harm them."

The boy paused for a breath. "Did I tell you I'm an initiate here at the school? Well, I am," and he puffed his chest with pride. "I'm training to be a healer and Marco and Rafael said I'm going to be the best one yet. I've been healing animals at the ranch since before I knew what I was doing—I'm a natural, they said. It's a pity you won't see the other students right now. Everyone is on holiday because of the Council meeting. They always send us home when the Council members are here, but my Uncle Marco said I can stay and then we'll go back to the ranch later, but he doesn't want me to call him Uncle, just Marco."

"You are Marco's nephew?" Keira asked when she could get a word in edgewise.

"Yes, my mom is—was—well," Justin stammered as his bright smile disappeared. He looked on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," Keira said with concern.

"It's okay," he whispered. "My mom was Marco and Rafael's sister. She and my dad died in a car crash."

"I am so sorry," Keira repeated and put her arm around the boy's narrow shoulders.

"It's okay," he said again. "Marco is really cool. He's been looking after me. We stay on this awesome ranch in Argentina, when we're not here, of course, and it's such fun when everyone is there. I have a horse and we go riding..." and Justin was off again, telling Keira about his animals at the ranch.

Keira smiled and nodded at the right places but her heart was breaking for the young boy. She wondered if she might not have misjudged Marco.

Justin eventually left after she promised to go see the pups at the first available opportunity.

Alone, Keira stood in front of the lead-paned windows of her room and looked out over the inner courtyard. She could see the tops of the trees waving beyond the castle's battlements. Her hands rubbed up and down her upper arms, trying to get some warmth back into her body.

*What am I doing here?*

It was only her love for Victoria which kept her from grabbing a phone and calling somebody, anybody, to come and fetch her from this place.

Keira groaned in frustration. Alison and Sammy were both with their parents, having wonderful, blissfully ignorant family holidays. And even if she did call her parents, or Richard and Mary, what would she tell them? That the world as they knew it was about to be annihilated by a power-crazy megalomaniac who wanted to be God?

Keira turned away from the window and paced restlessly past the antique dresser and big, four-poster bed. She glanced at her suitcase which lay open on the royal-blue bedcover and thought about unpacking her things, but nervous energy refused to let her stand still for more than a moment.

A soft knock at the door interrupted her pacing and she called, "It's open!"

A blond head peeked into the room and soft brown eyes gave Keira a head-to-toe scan, before their owner stepped

inside.

“Hallo, my name is Chloe. I wanted to make sure you were comfortable. Do you have everything you need?” the young woman asked.

“Yes, thanks, that’s very kind of you,” Keira said, mesmerized by the woman in front of her. Chloe seemed about a year or two older than Keira. Her skin was translucently pale and her hair was long, straight and silver-blond, shimmering with a light of its own. Her eyes were almost hypnotic in the way that they assessed Keira.

“Yes, Victoria was right, as usual,” Chloe said.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” Keira asked, confused by Chloe’s comment.

“You are The One,” Chloe said with unwavering certainty and not a trace of irony.

“Yes, well, that sounds great and all, but I have no idea what that means,” Keira couldn’t keep the irritation out of her voice.

“Oh dear, this has been hard for you, hasn’t it?” Chloe walked over to Keira. She took her hand as they sat down on a wine-red velvet-covered settee. “It wasn’t meant to happen like this you know. Victoria had planned to ease you into this life gradually. But even so, I am really happy to meet you at last. Welcome.”

Chloe’s kindness broke the last bit of control Keira had over her emotions and she burst into tears. “I am—so—sorry!” she cried, trying to wipe her eyes on her sleeve.

“It’s all right, you let it all out,” Chloe cooed while softly patting Keira’s back.

This just made Keira sob even louder. She was so used to hiding her feelings that she never needed to be comforted by anyone. Even her friends would have been shocked to see her like this, a complete blubbering wreck.

“It’s—I—I’ve always been so afraid!” Keira wailed. “Now—I don’t have to be. So I am really happy!” and she collapsed under another storm of tears.

“There, there,” Chloe crooned.

“But—but at the same time—I’m so mad!” Keira hiccupped and blew her nose into the wad of tissues Chloe handed her.

“It’s okay,” Chloe said. “I would be angry too.”

“You would?” Keira asked, grateful that someone had an inkling of what she was feeling.

“Of course,” Chloe nodded. “You grew up with these powers that you didn’t know what to do with. You had to hide it because people probably already thought you were slightly strange. Kids can be so cruel,” Chloe sighed.

The young woman’s empathy caused Keira to burst out in a fresh bout of sobbing. Years of pent-up emotion poured out of her in a confused tumble of words and tears and all the while, Chloe sat and listened, making comforting sounds and assuring her that, “There, there. It will be all right.”

After a century of agonising emotional purging, Keira’s sobs subsided and she lay spent, her head on Chloe’s lap. She gave a last, shuddering sigh and sat up. The room was darker; dusk had set in. It took a moment, but then she realised something inside her had changed. She felt strangely confident, even happy.

Keira looked at Chloe. “I can’t begin to thank you. I’m feeling so much better—it’s—I don’t know how to describe it!”

Chloe smiled. “It’s okay, Keira. Even The One is entitled to a breakdown every now and again.”

The women looked at each other and started giggling. Then suddenly, they had to hold on to each other as their laughter rang through the room.

“Well, well. Seems like you two are having fun,” a dry male voice sounded from the door.

Gasping for breath and clutching her side, Keira looked up. Marco and a younger, almost identical image of him, stood staring at them.

“Hallo, darling,” Chloe said, in between a fresh fit of giggles. She got up and glided over to the men. Keira felt an inexplicable pang of relief when Chloe hugged the younger man next to Marco.

“Keira, this is my partner, Rafael. He is Marco’s brother,” Chloe said.

“Pleased to meet you, Keira,” Rafael said. “I was looking for you,” he said to Chloe, holding her tightly to him. Keira was almost jealous of the love that shone between the couple; they had eyes only for each other.

“We’re on our way to change. Victoria said to tell you dinner will be served in an hour and the dress is formal,” Marco said. The brothers looked at each other with nearly identical grimaces.

“Oh come on,” Cloe laughed. “It’s not every day we get the chance to dress up.”

“Thanks. I’ll unpack—get ready—” Keira said and looked away. Her eyes felt as if they were the size of grapefruits, swollen from the marathon crying session.

Chloe noticed her discomfort and shooed the men out of the room. “Okay, off you go, we’ll meet you downstairs. Oh, Rafael darling, please ask Zina to come up here when you see her?” she called after the brothers as they left the room.

She came to sit next to Keira again and asked, “While we wait for Zina to come and help you freshen up, do you mind if I tell you my story, how I became part of the Guardians?”

“No, of course not,” Keira said, surprised at Chloe’s question.

Chloe took Keira’s hands in her own again. “Well,” she began. “I grew up in a small hamlet in Austria, near Innsbruck in the Alps. I have six older sisters. They all still live there; the eldest four in the village with their husbands and children; the other two with my parents.”

“Are they also magickal?” Keira asked.

“No, they are not,” Chloe replied. “You see, my parents are devoutly religious and view anything out of the ordinary



as an affront to the Church. Needless to say, when I came along and started seeing things that happened in nearby towns, they weren't impressed."

"What happened?" Keira asked.

"They tried to ignore it for as long as they could—warned me to never speak of it in front of the villagers. But then, I had another vision. It was late autumn and my father wanted to take the goats out to forage for the last wild grass. Winters are brutal in the mountains and the goats needed to fatten up as much as possible. I saw that a terrible snow storm was speeding to our area. I warned my father not to take the goats out, to stay inside, but he didn't listen. Well, the storm came and, when he was rescued from the mountains three days later, he was at death's door. The goats were all lost. The villagers had heard me crying out to him to come back when he left with the herd, when I told him what would happen. They accused me of being a witch, an abomination who brought the storm upon them and caused my family's ruin."

"Oh!" Keira gasped. It was she who showed Chloe sympathy this time as her new friend's eyes teared up.

"I'm okay, really," Chloe tried to smile. "It just hurts still, even after all this time. I was so scared my father would die. I had hand-reared almost all of those goats. How could they think I would do such a thing?"

"You don't have to go on," Keira said, not wanting Chloe to get upset reliving the past.

"I have to," Chloe said. "I want you to understand—" She squared her shoulders and continued.

"A few weeks later, when my father had recovered, he packed a small bag and told me to come with him. My mother and sisters turned their backs to me as we left. We walked to the train station. He didn't speak one word to me. At the station, he handed the bag to a woman in a uniform, and walked away. I tried to follow, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the train. I was seven years old and my

parents had given me up to the State Orphanage. I stayed there for two years.”

“Oh, Chloe! I am so sorry,” Keira didn’t know what to say. Her own childhood suddenly seemed almost idyllic.

“When I was nine years old, a couple showed up at the Orphanage and adopted me. They said they couldn’t have children of their own and that they had been looking for me for a very long time. Well, they were Guardians and had read my ‘signature’ in the Akasha. They became my parents and, from the first day, I received only love and support from them. I came to believe that I had a gift, not a curse, and that I can help to protect our world from evil. That may sound a bit fairy-tale-ish, but it is what we do. I found my place and my purpose. My adoptive parents taught me what they could and then I came to the Initiates’ School. Here I was identified as a Seer and received additional training to join the Draaken. I also met Rafael,” Chloe smiled. All traces of sadness wiped from her eyes.

“So you see, Keira. Even the saddest of stories can have a happy ending. All of us have walked different paths to get here, some easy and some difficult, but in the end we are all the same.”

Another knock sounded at the door and without waiting for a response, a tall, elegant woman stepped into the room. Her ebony skin glowed with an inner radiance and Keira felt an immediate tranquillity descend over her.

“You called, Chloe?” The woman’s voice was every bit as composed as her demeanour.

“Keira, this is Zina. She is our Healer.” Chloe introduced them. Zina stepped forward with a warm smile. “It is so nice to finally meet you,” she said.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Keira replied, curious as to why Chloe had called for a Healer.

“Now, what can I help you with?” Zina asked.

“I’m not quite sure,” Keira said. “Chloe mentioned you might help me freshen up, but I don’t know how you are

going to fix this,” and she pointed to her swollen face.

“I’ll leave you two to it, I have to go get ready myself,” Chloe called from the door, closing it behind her.

“Hmmm...shouldn’t be a problem. Lie down here on your bed,” Zina said and waited for Keira to lie down. She placed her hands about two inches above Keira’s face and asked her to close her eyes.

Keira could feel a warm, tingling sensation spread all over her skin and the smell of peppermint lingered in the air.

“There, all done,” Zina said and helped Keira sit up.

“Okay—well—thanks, I guess,” Keira said.

Zina laughed, “Go and look in the mirror.”

Keira walked over to the dressing table. “Oh! Wow!” she exclaimed and stared at her face. Her skin was clear and her eyes sparkling. Even the perpetual dark circles, the result of countless late nights, had disappeared. “That’s amazing. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure. I’ll see you at dinner in a few minutes,” Zina said as she too left the room.

“Thanks again!” Keira called and looked back at her reflection in the mirror. “It does help to be magickal,” she murmured.

## Chapter 12

Several guests were already assembled in the Great Hall when Keira arrived. She paused in the door and pulled self-consciously at her midnight-blue satin dress.

*Thank goodness I packed this,* she thought.

The men were dressed in black-tie and the women in elegant evening dresses. She noticed Marco leaning casually against the wall next to the fireplace. He was talking with Rafael and Chloe. Simone sat on the armrest of a leather couch nearby, dressed in a pale gold shift dress, looking as if she had stepped off of the cover of *Vogue*.

"Miss Keira, I presume?" a laughing voice interrupted her thoughts. Keira smiled back at the rakish looking young man in front of her.

"My name is Brian Smith. At your service." He gave a low bow, then straightened up and combed his ash-blond hair out of his eyes.

"Nice to meet you, Brian," she nodded back at him. "Thanks," she added as he handed her a small glass of sherry.

"Welcome to *Casa de la Guardians*," he smiled and clinked his glass against hers. "What do you think of it so far?"

"Well, I only arrived this afternoon. There hasn't been much time to look around, but the bit that I've seen is very impressive."

"Wait until you see the rest of it. I'd be happy to serve as your tour guide, if our slave master gives us any time off," Brian said.

"Slave master?" Keira asked.

“Marco,” he answered with a nod in the other man’s direction. “He’s placed us on high alert.”

“Is that because of the Council meeting, or the threat from Daemon?” Keira asked.

“You know about that?” Brian asked in return.

She nodded and sipped her sherry. She didn’t want to tell Brian she had only had a brief introduction from Victoria; she needed all the information she could get.

“Well, it is both actually. We’re always more vigilant when all the Council members are gathered together, but the thing with Daemon—”

“Will be sorted as soon as I get my hands around his throat!” A booming voice interrupted Brian. A man the size of a small mountain grabbed Keira’s hand and shook it vigorously up and down. “Howdy, I’m Adam. You must be Keira—I’ve heard a hell of a lot about you—glad to meet you!”

Keira grinned and gingerly tried to extract her crushed fingers from his grip. Adam had a smile a mile wide and muscles nearly as big. It seemed as if his tuxedo was ready to burst at the seams trying to contain the man within it.

“You’ll have to fall in line, mate. There are a few of us wanting the privilege of killing that bastard,” Brian said.

“Yeah, yeah—you know you’ve got no chance against me.” Adam’s smile held a dare.

“So, are you both part of the Draaken?” Keira interrupted what looked like an argument waiting to happen.

“Yes, we are. Although I’ve been here longer than Adam,” Brian answered.

“That’s right—old man—why don’t you go retire back in England, and let the Aussie take care of things—”

“So, Australia, I’ve never been there,” Keira desperately searched her brain for a topic that would defuse the situation. She smiled with relief when she caught her aunt’s eye.

“Keira!” Victoria beckoned them over to where she stood with an older gentleman with a shock of grey hair and a big walrus moustache. Victoria looked elegant and regal, as always, dressed in a long copper coloured skirt and matching bolero jacket with black velvet trim.

“Keira, I would like to introduce you to one of my oldest friends and colleagues, Mr Leonardo Savelli,” Victoria said as the sprightly gentleman took Keira’s hand.

“*Buona sera, bella.* It is a pleasure to meet you,” he said, bowing slightly and kissing the back of her hand.

“Leo is the Leader of the Italian Families, and also a member of Council,” Victoria added.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr Savelli,” Keira replied with a smile.

“I see you have already met Brian and Adam,” Victoria nodded to the men who kept to Keira’s side.

“Yes, and Brian’s offered to show me around the castle.”

“Which he won’t be able to do any time soon, since he will be busy with guard duty. Your shift starts in fifteen minutes,” Marco said as he joined the small group.

“Yes, boss!” Brian winked at Keira as he excused himself and left the room.

“Toodles!” Adam called after him with a grin.

“Marco, will you please introduce Keira to everyone before we go in to dinner?” Victoria requested.

It looked as if Adam wanted to say something, but he stepped back as Marco held his arm out to Keira. “Shall we?”

She nodded and took his arm, following when he steered her towards Zina who was talking to a distinguished looking man. “You’ve met Zina, of course; and this is my mentor, Chetan,” Marco said as they stopped in front of the couple.

Chetan seemed relaxed, but Keira sensed a great, contained power, as if he could erupt into a storm of movement at the slightest notice. A burnished copper pendant in the shape of a flame hung from a leather thong around his neck.

“Keira,” Chetan acknowledged. “I go by a different name when taking care of business in New York, but among the Guardians, I am known by my Sioux tribal name.”

“Nice to meet you,” Keira said.

“You look beautiful,” Zina smiled at her.

Keira wasn’t sure she heard correctly when Marco murmured a soft, “I agree,” next to her, but judging by the amused glance Zina gave him, *something* was said.

“May I join you?” a polite voice asked and a dapper Japanese man bowed to the group.

“Of course,” Marco answered. “Mr Yoshibumi Harigaya, I would like to introduce you to Ms Keira Wilde.”

“*Konbanwa*, Miss Wilde,” he said with another bow.

“*Konbanwa Harigaya-san. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu*,” Keira replied.

“Do you speak Japanese?” he asked in surprise.

“Only the very basics,” Keira smiled. “I’ve always been fascinated by Japanese culture and would like to visit your country very soon. Are you also a member of the Draaken?” Keira asked.

“No, I am not,” he replied. “I have been sent by the Asian Families as an observer to your Council meeting. We have our own way of honouring the Akasha, and have our own conventions. However, recent events are threatening our way of life and it might become necessary for us to join forces. The matter will be decided when I return to Japan and report to my Elders.”

A bell chimed to announce dinner and Mr Harigaya offered his arm to Keira before Marco could, and escorted her to the dining room.

She was grateful to be seated next to Chloe, who kept up a stream of cheerful chatter and gossip about everyone present, as well as tipping her off on the Council members expected to arrive the next day. After a while, she had a pretty clear picture of how internationally represented the Guardians truly were. Victoria had mentioned that they were

spread across the world, but Chloe's information made it so much more real to Keira.

Through subtle questions, she learned that Marco's family was the most influential in South America. His father had recently died and Marco became Leader of the Santana Family. At twenty-four years old, that made him one of the youngest Family Leaders in the world. Besides that, he was also Commander of the Draaken and everyone expected him to become the next Chairperson of Council, when Victoria stepped down.

"His father died recently?" Keira pressed Chloe.

"Yes, not long after the accident that killed his sister and brother-in-law." Chloe's voice sounded strained, giving Keira the distinct feeling there was more to the story.

Keira looked up and caught Marco's brooding eyes staring at her from across the table. He lifted his glass to her in a silent toast and she looked away quickly, feeling flustered and out of sorts.

"That is awful," she whispered. She didn't want to force the subject and made a mental note to ask Victoria about it later.

It was a few minutes before midnight when Victoria rose and wished everyone a good night. She crossed to Keira, rested her hands on the young woman's shoulders, and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Good night, darling," she whispered. "Please remember that, no matter what happens, I love you and have the world of faith in you."

"I love you, too, Aunt Vic," Keira smiled. Victoria gave her a last hug and retired to her room.



## Chapter 13

Keira was woken early the next morning by a timid knock-knock. She opened her bedroom door to find two children impatiently hopping up and down. She had scarcely enough time to change from her PJs before Justin and his friend, Amber, dragged her outside with the promise of a 'castle tour.'

"Aunt Vic said to tell you she's sorry she can't take you, but she's preparing for the meeting, and the Draaken are busy with stuff, so here we are!" Justin said.

Amber was no slouch when it came to chatter, and in the space of two minutes, Keira knew everything about her. She was from the village nearby, her parents were not magickae but worked at the castle (her mother was the cook and her father the groundskeeper), she loved playing hide-and-seek with her best friend Justin, her dearest wish was to become a member of the Draaken (which might just be a possibility because her cousin twice removed was one), and she was nine-and-a-half years old and hated her curly red hair.

"But I love your hair," Keira said and made a friend for life.

"Come on slowcoaches!" Justin teased the girls as he skipped up the stone staircase in front of them.

"Coming," Keira panted as she reached another landing in the seemingly endless climb.

"It's okay Keira, we don't have to race," Amber said, frowning after Justin. "Slow down!" she yelled at him.

"Here we are," Justin said as he pushed a wooden trap-door up and over. They climbed the last few steps, through

the trap-door and out onto a narrow stone eyrie in the castle's topmost tower.

Keira sucked her breath in as a sudden attack of vertigo had her clinging to the wall.

"Are you all right?" Justin asked, casually peering over the railing into the drop below.

"Yes," Keira said. "Give me a minute. I've never been good with heights."

"I'll hold your hand," Amber offered. "It's really very beautiful up here. Just take one step and you'll see. Come," she encouraged Keira to walk forward and enjoy the view.

Keira took a deep breath and joined the children at the railing. She tried to not look down, concentrating instead on the horizon where a rolling sea of green stretched away beyond the castle walls. On the horizon towards the west, she could see the misty blue peaks of a mountain range peering out above the emerald waves.

"Germany is that way," Justin pointed towards the mountains.

Sudden movement on the wide, surrounding wall caught Keira's attention, and she watched as a camouflaged figure scanned the forest through binoculars.

"What is he doing?" she asked pointing to the man far below them.

"Oh, that is one of the Draaken. Look, there are more of them," and, one by one, Justin pointed them out. "Marco says we have to be extra vigi—vigil—something."

"Vigilant," Keira suppressed a smile, not wanting to offend the boy.

"Yes, that's what he said. So there are guards all around, making sure the Council people are safe. Look, there's one of them coming now."

A glint of black approached the castle through the forest and Keira watched as a limousine came into view and drove over the lowered drawbridge into the courtyard.

A statuesque woman stepped out of the car just as Victoria came walking down the steps from the front door. Her aunt kissed the woman on both cheeks and escorted her inside. Keira couldn't hear what the women were saying but, by the way Victoria welcomed the new arrival, it seemed as if they were old friends.

"Justin, was that Zina's aunt?" Amber asked.

"I think so. We're a bit high up here to be sure."

Amber turned to Keira. "Zina's aunt is very famous in Africa. She was a model, and now she's helping poor children. Aunt Victoria always said that 'there's a woman with her head screwed on right.' What does that mean, Keira? Our heads are not screwed on, are they?"

"No," Keira laughed. "They're not. It means that she is a very intelligent woman, and uses her intelligence in a good way."

"Let's go, there's lots more to see!" Justin called as he turned and climbed back through the trapdoor. Keira gave a sigh of relief. *Anything to be at ground level again*, she thought and hurried after the children.

They were soon walking down long hallways covered with more rugs woven in warm earthy colours. Iron brackets, attached to the grey stone walls, held torches that looked ancient enough to have been used when the castle was just built.

"Those are really old," Justin confirmed when he saw Keira looking at one. "It would be so cool if we could still use them, but we've got electricity now." He dismissed the invention with an annoyed huff.

Down another passage and around one more corner, they stopped in front of wide double doors. "The library," Justin swung the doors open and waved his arm at the treasure inside. The large, sunny room was overflowing with books. They were stacked on floor-to-ceiling shelves, on tables and on chairs. Keira's hands itched to open a few of the leather-bound volumes within reach, but the children

each grabbed an arm and dragged her off to continue exploring.

*I'll have to come here again,* Keira promised herself.

Another long hallway had her feet dragging as she admired the paintings hanging on the walls. She couldn't help wishing she knew more about art.

"This one is my favourite," Amber said and stopped in front of a painting depicting three boys sitting on a beach and looking out at the sea. Three sail boats dotted the background.

"I've never been to the sea," Amber said, and peered intently at the artwork. "Is it really as big as Justin said? He said it never ends," she turned to Keira with a puzzled frown.

"Well, it certainly is big," Keira answered. "But it has a beginning and an end, just like everything else."

"Come on you two!" Justin yelled from the end of the long hallway.

Keira laughed and ran with Amber to join the impatient boy.

"Let's go to the school," Justin said as they caught up with him.

"Yeah!" Amber agreed.

"Isn't it closed right now?" Keira asked, unsure whether she wanted to see the place where she should have spent her teenage years.

"It's closed for initiate training, but the Draaken members use it when they're here," Justin explained and, once again, led the way. After a few turns and down a flight of steps, he opened a single wooden door and they stepped out into the bright sunlight.

As they crossed the cobblestone courtyard, another black limousine pulled up. A grey-suited man stepped out, gave Keira's little group a dismissive glance, and hurried up the steps.

"Who was that?" Keira asked.

"Simone's Family representative," Justin said with an equally dismissive shrug.

"Oh," Keira said. It seems as if everyone she'd met up to now had family arriving at the castle. "Do you know if any Wilde members are coming, besides Aunt Vic?"

"No, this meeting is only for Council members. Each family has only one representative on Council and Aunt Victoria is there for the Wildes," Justin answered.

"Are there any Wildes in the Draaken?" Keira asked. She knew nothing about her own family, aside from the information Aunt Vic had given her, and that really only told her that they'd been around for a long time and some of them were magickal. She didn't know who or how many were involved with the Guardians. It could be anyone, even cousin Gisele and her Cambridge fiancé.

"Not in the Draaken, but there are quite a few who are active Guardians. General members of the Guardians have all kinds of abilities. They help with weather stuff, healing people and animals, finding lost things," Justin answered her question. "I would have liked to be able to do that, I lose stuff all the time."

"Me too!" Amber laughed.

"There have been Wildes who were Draaken members, in the past. The history books are in the library, you can read all about it."

Keira nodded. *Bloody hell, I've got so much to learn. Which is probably the understatement of the year.*

Her worry must have reflected on her face because Amber smiled and squeezed her hand. "It's okay, Keira. We'll teach you. There are a lot of people, and other things, out there who want to get to the Akasha. It is important that you know everything."

Keira looked down to the girl's solemn face. *Other things?*

"Here we are," Justin said as they stopped in front of a small, squat stone building.

"This is it?" Keira asked, confused. "It is so small." The unassuming structure was hardly one storey high and didn't seem big enough to hold one of the black limousines, let alone a school.

Amber merely giggled behind her hands. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as Justin rapped a coded knock on the door. They waited for a moment, then the door silently swung open.

"Come," Justin beckoned as he and Amber disappeared into the darkness beyond.

Keira followed cautiously; a staircase wound its way down and she could hear the children's voices disappearing below her.

*Curiouser and curiouser...*

Two-hundred stairs and she stopped counting, winding her way further down in silence. She glanced at the small globes spaced at intervals against the curving wall, casting just enough light so she could see her feet. She wouldn't want to be here when those all went out. Keira shrugged off the thought of pitch-dark, cold and slimy tunnels as she reached the end of the stairwell. A narrow passage ran straight ahead for a bit, then turned sharply left.

Suddenly, she heard yells and what sounded like crashes and the impact of something heavy falling.

"Justin! Amber!" she called in alarm, sprinted down the passage and turned the corner towards the noise.

"Here, Keira! Come sit with us," Amber waved from where she sat next to Chloe.

"Hi," Chloe greeted with a smile and patted the bench next to her.

"Hallo," Keira said, out of breath. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, silly. Come watch the show!" Amber said, bouncing up and down in her seat.

Keira looked around. She had an elevated view into a large, rectangular room, measuring about forty by thirty feet and with twenty foot high walls on three sides. The front wall

seemed to be made of transparent safety glass, through which she could see two men circling each other.

It was Marco and Rafael, both shirtless and seemingly intent on killing each other.

“What are they doing?” Keira gasped.

“Training,” Chloe replied. “The castle is shielded, so when we use our magick in here, it doesn’t ripple out into the Akasha. It is perfect for practicing.”

“Oh,” Keira said, trying to seem knowledgeable. “It looks like a squash court.”

“Only bigger and much stronger,” Chloe answered. “It has to be.”

A particularly hard right hook from Marco sent Rafael crashing into the front wall.

“I see what you mean,” Keira winced.

“We learn how to fight physically and magickally,” Chloe explained. “It is important that you know how to box, or do judo, when your opponent can also do magick.”

Down in the Pit, Rafael laughed, stood up, and ran at Marco at full speed. His hands were stretched out before him and an invisible force pushed Marco until he was pinned against the back wall. A sudden flare of fire enveloped the brothers; the heat on Keira’s face made her flinch.

“Woohoo, go Marco!” Justin yelled and jumped up and down, clapping his hands.

“Go baby!” Chloe called and seemed completely unconcerned with the fact that her partner was out of sight behind a wall of flames. She turned to Keira and said, “I can show you the rest of the school later. There are more classrooms down that passage.” She pointed to her right.

They were distracted as Rafael erupted out of the fire ball and rebounded off of another wall.

“Bloody hell!” he swore and got up with a groan.

“Are you all right there, brother?” Marco asked with a grin as he stood, panting and covered in sweat.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rafael shrugged. “I’ll get you next time.”

The brothers laughed and slapped each other on the back. They opened a door in the safety glass, grabbed towels from a bench and walked up the stairs to join the small group in the viewing gallery.

"Oh, hi, Keira," Rafael said when he noticed her next to Chloe.

"Morning," Marco said.

"Morning," Keira replied. She didn't know where to look. Marco stood in front of her, clad only in a loose pair of black track pants. His bare skin glistened in the soft light.

*He is beautiful*, the stray thought flickered in her mind.

Keira glimpsed a tattoo in the shape of a flame on his upper right arm. He caught her looking at it.

"It is the same as Chetan's pendant," she said, trying to sound casual.

"Yes," he nodded. "It is the sign of the Firewalkers. I told you that Chetan was my mentor."

"Cool," Keira mumbled, then mentally cringed. She couldn't believe she'd said that. If only she had an excuse to flee.

"Would you like to join us for lunch?" Chloe asked the two men, rescuing Keira from her embarrassment.

"Thanks, but we have to go check on the guards." Marco answered Chloe, but his eyes were on Keira.

"See you later, gorgeous," Rafael whispered to Chloe, and they shared a long kiss which had the children giggling and Keira looking at her feet.

"Justin, maybe you could go and show Keira the pups later this afternoon," Marco suggested, ignoring his brother.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Justin and Amber shouted.

"Sure," Keira said, welcoming anything that would get her out of there.



## Chapter 14

"Chloe has been probing for a week already, and she still can't see what Daemon is doing. She said it's as if he's raised a shield over his headquarters in New York; as if it's disappeared off the map," Victoria said to the old man sitting opposite her.

"Hmm, I can't see how he could have managed a shield of that magnitude by himself. It took the full Council days to raise the one around the castle, remember?" Leonardo Savelli said, stroking his silver moustache.

"Yes," Victoria frowned. "But we have underestimated him before, to our detriment. I will propose to Council that we have a joint Seeing, with Chloe as our binder. We *have* to know what he is planning."

"That is true. But what of our spies in New York? Any news from them?"

"No, Marco hasn't heard anything, and that is even more worrisome."

"Hmm, it is not like them to not report in on schedule."

Victoria sighed. "I am getting too old for this, Leo. It is time to hand over to the next generation."

"I agree, but to make Keira the next High Priestess? I don't know, Victoria," and it was the old man's turn to sigh. "She is so young. She has had no training in our ways. Our world is as foreign to her as life on Mars. What makes you think she would even want to join us?"

"I know she will; it is in her blood. Her destiny will not be denied." Victoria was adamant.

"Hmm." Leo stroked his moustache once more. "It will take more than that to convince the Council members she is

indeed The One.”

“Leave it to me,” Victoria said. She would not be denied either.

A discreet cough sounded as Amber’s mother entered the library with a tray piled high with sandwiches and coffee.

“Ah! Just what I needed,” Leonardo called and gallantly took the tray from her.

“Thank you, sir,” the cook curtseyed and turned to leave the room.

“Wait, Maria!” Victoria called.

“Yes, ma’am?” the cook asked.

“Your daughter, her name is Amber, correct?” Victoria asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I hope she didn’t—”

“No, no, everything is perfectly fine,” Victoria smiled. “In fact, it might be good news, if you are amenable to the fact that she has magick in her?”

“Madam! Oh, that is wonderful news. We are so proud, thank you, thank you!”

Victoria laughed. “I saw her this morning, she was on her way to Keira’s room, and I picked up a flicker of potential from her. Please ask her to come and see me after the Council meeting.”

“Oh! Madam—I am so happy. *She* will be so happy! Oh, thank you, thank you!” Maria rambled on and on, gripping her apron tightly.

“You are very welcome. Now, do you know where Keira is?” Victoria asked the overwhelmed woman.

“Yes, ma’am. She’s having lunch in the dining room.”

“Good. Could you please ask her to come see me, here, when she’s done.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do that right away, and thank you, thank you again!” Maria curtseyed before she ran out of the room.

"Hmm," Leo beamed as the door closed behind the proud mother. "It is days like this that make it all worth it."

"Yes," Victoria smiled. "And it makes me even more determined to ensure that Keira does not lose any more of her birthright than she already has."

"Hmm."

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Victoria was still sitting in the same chair in front of the tall windows when Keira came to see her. Leo had excused himself and the lunch things had been cleared away.

"Hi, Aunt Vic. You wanted to talk to me?" Keira asked.

"Yes, I did. Please, come in," Victoria said.

Keira took the seat vacated by Leonardo and gave her aunt a hesitant smile. They hadn't had the opportunity to have a proper talk since their arrival, and she didn't know how she was going to tell her aunt about the decisions she had made while touring the castle that morning.

"So, what do you think of the castle?" Victoria asked.

"I love it, Aunt Vic. The history behind this building must be amazing."

"It is," Victoria answered. "And I would like for you to become a part of that history."

"Aunt Vic—" Keira started.

"Keira, I know this must be overwhelming and I know that you are angry at me for keeping you from your true birthright. But please allow me to make up for that now. Stay here, with me, and I will show you what it is like to be a Guardian of the Akasha. You will train with the Draaken and take your place as Leader of the Wilde Family and, later, as High Priestess of the Guardians."

"I can't," Keira shook her head.

Victoria said nothing.

"I am sorry," Keira said, firmer this time. "All of this," she waved her arm to encompass everything, "this is not *me*, it

is not who I am.”

“But you are mistaken, Keira. It is *exactly* who you are. It is your destiny,” Victoria said. She leaned forward as if to emphasise her point.

“No,” Keira shook her head. “My destiny is in London. I’ve decided I will tell my parents that I want to be a professional photographer, maybe travel the world for a while and build my portfolio. I have worked very hard to put all this—weirdness—behind me. I am not going to throw that away.”

“You don’t realise what you are saying, dear child. Stay here, where you are accepted for who you *really* are.”

“But I don’t know who I really am, don’t you see? This—this thing you call a gift—it’s been a curse to me my whole life. It’s made me hide and lie, and the only thing I’ve ever wanted was to finish school so I could leave.”

“Keira, please—”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Vic. An hour ago I saw two men, brothers, fighting and flinging each other around and treating it as if it was a big normal game. Well, this is not normal and it is not a game. I can’t be part of some underground organisation and—and actually killing people. Because I know at some point it will be expected of me, and I can’t do that. I don’t want to hurt anyone. And I can’t have these people look up to me and expect things of me and then I fail them.” Keira pleaded with Victoria to understand, but she was also determined that she would not be swayed.

“But your magick—” Victoria said.

“I have managed to keep it under control for many years. I don’t need the magick to be happy,” Keira said. “And this Daemon—person, he knows who I am, but once he realises I want no part of this, he will leave me alone.”

Keira could not read her aunt’s expression. The older woman leaned back in her chair, her eyes examining Keira as if she was taking stock of her for the first time.

"I am sorry," Keira said again. "But you will have to find someone else. Someone who is better suited to this kind of life. Someone who has grown up with it all."

Victoria took an audible, deep breath. "At least promise me one thing," she said.

"Yes?" Keira asked.

"Promise me you won't leave until after the Council meeting. Let's spend a few days together, just you and me. We'll talk about renovating this old heap of stones," Victoria tried to smile.

"I promise," Keira replied softly. It took everything she had not to cry as she got up to leave.

"Thank you," Victoria said and lifted a tired hand to wave to Keira as she closed the library's door behind her.

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Keira wanted to get to her room as quickly as possible. The conversation with Aunt Vic played in an unending loop through her mind; she wanted to be alone to get a grip on her emotions. Her aunt's disappointment was a hard blow to her conscience, but she didn't feel as if she had any other choice.

*I am not cut out for this! I am not a fighter, I am scared of heights, I HATE getting hurt. How can she even ask this of me? I am not the person she thinks I am. Better to go back to London and continue living my life the way it was before. Damn it! Things are never going to be the same.*

*No, it will be. I have to calm down and think about this logically. I am not some kind of... Amazon warrior.*

*Neither is Chloe,* a small voice whispered in her mind.

"Oh shut up!" Keira snarled out loud.

Lost in her frantic thoughts, she nearly walked into Justin, pacing up and down in front of her room.

"Keira, I thought you'd never get away. You promised to come and look at the pups, remember?"

"Oh, Justin. I'm sorry, but can we do it tomorrow? I am really tired."

"No! We have to go now, before it gets dark. She hides them in the night and then it's really difficult to find them. Please Keira, you promised! Amber's mom said she can't go, she has to help in the kitchen or something, so it is just you and me."

Keira looked at Justin's expectant face; she'd already said "No" once today, she couldn't bring herself to say it again.

*It's not as if he's asking me to save the world or anything.*

"All right, let me get a jacket. Wait for me by the front door, okay?"

"Okay!" Justin called as she opened her door. "Be sure to get comfy shoes, we have to walk a bit!"

"Oh great," Keira grumbled.

She was still distracted when she arrived at the front door and jumped when a tall figure stepped out from the shadows.

"Mind if I join you?" Marco asked.

"I thought you were inspecting the guards—or something," Keira answered, suddenly breathless.

"All done," he said. "Besides, it gets dark quickly in these woods. I will go with you. It is not a good idea to be outside the walls at night."

"Outside the walls? Why are your dogs outside the walls?" Keira asked.

"Come on you guys!" Justin called and Marco didn't have a chance to answer as they hurried across the courtyard. They stopped at a small wooden door set in the outer wall next to the raised drawbridge. A guard emerged from the shadows. "Out again Justin?" he asked.

"Hi Frank. Yeah, I want to show Keira the pups. Don't worry, Marco is going with us." The guard let them pass. Keira could hear him lock the door behind them, then a

clunk as he dropped a wooden bar across it as an extra precaution.

She followed Justin as he skipped down stone steps leading to the moat. They got into a small wooden boat, and Marco took up the oars and rowed them to the opposite bank. Justin hopped out, tied the boat to a wooden post, and disappeared down the road without waiting for them to catch up.

Marco held his hand to Keira and helped her out of the boat.

*Stop it!* Keira scolded herself as his touch burned electric tingles up her arm.

He led the way as they followed in the direction Justin had taken. After a few minutes of walking in silence, Marco turned off the road, down an almost invisible path through the undergrowth. The trees closed above them and it was as if they were slowly submerging into an underwater world, filled with hushed sighs and whispers. It became progressively darker and Keira was suddenly glad that Marco had come along.

She loved the woods on her family's estate and used to slip out at all times of the night to wander among the trees with only a small flashlight to light her way. Yet here, the woods felt less friendly, less welcoming. It was as if they resented the humans' intrusion.

Just as Keira was seriously considering turning around, Justin stood waiting for them.

"Where are the—"

"Ssshhhh!" he whispered. "Follow me, Keira. I have to warn them that you are coming, although they probably know already," and he disappeared into the trees.

"Oh, bloody hell!" she muttered and heard an amused chuckle. She glared back at Marco as she made her way forward down the footpath and promptly stumbled over a rock. She gasped and stretched her hands out to break her

fall, but Marco was there to catch her and swung her up into his arms, lifting her off the ground.

Keira's breath caught in her throat and she instinctively flung her arms around his neck. He carefully, slowly, put her back down until she stood on her feet.

Time seemed suspended.

Marco gave a soft groan as his arms circled tighter around her waist.

*Oh, this feels so right,* Keira thought, making no attempt to break free.

"Hey, you two, come on!" Justin called. Keira heard a frustrated sigh from above her head and couldn't stop a small smile from forming around her lips. She allowed Marco to take her hand and lead her on down the path.

*He is as affected as I am,* Keira thought. *But how is that possible? We don't even know each other.* She couldn't help but wish her friends were here, it would have been great to ask their advice. She had no doubt that Sammy would be cheering her on, while Alison would caution her to take it slow.

In a clearing in the woods, they found Justin sitting in the grass, playing with three grey pups, their tails wagging and ears erect. They bared their teeth and mock stalked each other, pouncing and rolling, getting up and chasing each other through the grass. On either side of him were two huge adult wolves, staring directly at Keira. Growls rumbled in their throats.

"Oh!" Keira gasped.

"Move very slowly," Marco warned and led her cautiously closer.

"Cool it!" Justin said and poked one of the wolves in the ribs with his elbow. Instead of attacking, the wolf gave him an embarrassed look and the rumbling stopped.

Keira felt her mouth hanging open and quickly closed it when Justin laughed.



"It's okay, Keira. Come closer and I'll introduce you. This is Ylva," he said, pointing to the female. "And this Varg," he pointed to the male.

Keira carefully extended her hand, palm up, to let the female wolf sniff her. A pair of very intelligent amber eyes locked with hers and there was a familiar rush of warm emotion as she connected with Ylva.

*They're no different from my friends at home!* she thought with relief, and laughed when she picked up on Ylva's indignation at being compared to the small red foxes Keira played with as a child.

"She likes you!" Justin smiled. That seemed to give the rest of the pack permission to come forward and introduce themselves to Keira. Now completely at ease, she sat down in the clearing and was soon surrounded by jumping pups and eight more curious adults.

She glanced up, looking for Marco. He leaned against a nearby tree, arms folded, and watched her with burning intensity. She immediately turned away, hiding behind the veil of her long hair, and immersed herself in stroking the nearest wolf.

It seemed like only minutes had passed before Marco interrupted their play.

"Come, we have to get back to the castle," he said.

"Aawww, Marco! Just a little longer!" Justin begged.

"Sorry, Justin; it's nearly dusk. We have a formal dinner with all the Council members this evening. Victoria wouldn't want us to be late."

"I can't believe it is so late already!" Keira stood up, stiff from the cold ground and brushed off her jeans.

Sudden snarls erupted from all the wolves around her, causing her to jump back at the unexpectedness of it. Marco was at her side in a flash.

"What's going on?" Keira cried in alarm.

Marco held his hand up in silent command and everyone, wolves included, froze and listened. Distant

booms and crashes sounded from the direction of the castle. The man and the boy looked at each other and an unspoken discussion seemed to flow between them.

"Excuse me! Could you tell me what's happening?" Keira snapped, her patience stretched to breaking point by the currents of tension that whipped around the clearing.

"The castle is under attack. You are staying with Justin, follow him, he knows what to do," Marco said.

"My aunt—I'm going with you!"

"No! You stay away from this. I'll come back for you as soon as I can. Justin, wait here with her."

Keira merely stared up at Marco; her determination reflected in her eyes.

"I am coming with you," she said.

He gave an exasperated sigh. "Fine, but only to the edge of the woods. Stay away from the walls!"

Justin looked at Keira; his young face tense as he tried to hide his fear. "It's okay, Keira, I'll look after you," he said and took her hand.

The wolves surrounded the humans as they melted into the trees, trying to be as quiet as possible. Marco led them on a different route back to the draw-bridge. Keira's anxiety had a tight grip on her throat. They couldn't see the castle yet, but could hear loud explosions and voices screaming. Faint blue flashes lit the air above the trees.

Marco started running. Keira and Justin followed as fast as they could, but he easily outran them.

"Stay here!" he yelled at them before he disappeared around a bend in the path.

Keira and Justin reached the edge of the woods and they froze in their tracks. The castle was illuminated in the dusk ahead of them. The draw-bridge was down and the big gates thrown open.

Marco disappeared into the chaos that reigned in the courtyard. Sporadic bolts of energy lit the scene; a swarm of

black-clad figures outnumbered the Draaken and Council members who were fighting side by side.

“Justin!” she whirled around to the boy. “Stay here, I’m going to help!” She ran down the path, scarcely hearing Justin crying out behind her, pleading with her to stay with him.

The wolves ran beside her, eager to join the fight, their tongues lolling and white fangs bared. As she reached the draw-bridge, a pack of something resembling dogs erupted from the inner courtyard. Keira screamed and threw her arms over her head, but the wolves were there and the two packs ran at each other with a crash. The fighting began in a blur of snarls and flying fur. Ylva grabbed a dog nearly twice her size by its throat, shaking and tearing with ferocious determination.

Then Keira ran into her own battle.

Out of nowhere, a huge fist connected with Keira’s shoulder, sending her forward, flat on her stomach, her hands bloodied as they scraped on the rough stone. As she looked up at her attacker, a shimmer of energy hit his body and the man fell sprawling back on the cobblestones. His sightless eyes stared up at the stars. Zina stepped closer and pulled Keira to her feet.

“You must get out of here. You have not been trained for this!”

Keira looked around in a daze. “Where is Aunt Victoria?”

“I don’t know. She was in the Great Hall when the attack started. Come back!” Zina shouted as Keira went running across the courtyard.

She swerved to avoid people who were lashing bolts of energy at each other, some of which rebounded off the castle walls and sent splinters of rock ricocheting through the air.

The stench of burning hair stung in her nose and she wanted to cover her ears against the thundering explosions and screams of the wounded and dying.

Suddenly, she was surrounded. A circle of sneering figures stepped forward, closing in on her as she turned around, looking for an escape.

She could see Marco behind them. Attackers swarmed him from all sides as he fought to reach her. His mouth formed her name, but the word got lost in the deafening noise.

Terror threatened to overwhelm Keira. One of the men snickered in anticipation and she felt the sizzling, crackling build-up of their power in the air as it reached its climax and they prepared for the kill.

Keira took a shuddering breath, then another. A last glance showed her that Marco was no closer, no one could help her. She squeezed her eyes shut and pushed back the hysterical girl inside of her who cried she'd never be able to do this, who wanted to give up and run away.

Reaching into the deepest part of her psyche, Keira blocked out the external noise, soothed her internal chaos, and allowed her soul to connect with the space around her. Without hesitation she stepped into the Akasha and when she opened her eyes again, there was a moment's hesitation in the circle closing in on her. The moment was all she needed.

Keira unleashed her fury. She was lost in the whirlpool of her own power swirling like a tornado around her. Screams of terror wrenched from her victims and tore through the air like nails on a blackboard. They fought each other to flee from the young woman they were ready to kill only moments before, but a vortex of swirling energy lifted them from their feet and flung them over the thirty-foot boundary wall.

Keira didn't feel her feet leave the ground. She hovered, the very centre of her being connected with the Akasha. Wind howled and thunder crashed with a violence that made the earth shudder. Lightning streaked down from the sky and incinerated two would-be assassins who took their comrades' place in front of her.

She floated toward the front doors of the castle, where Victoria stood on the top step. Her aunt was holding off four men, arms whirling and near-invisible heat waves shooting from her hands into their bodies.

“Keira, get back! Run!” Victoria screamed, agonising fear for Keira’s safety etched on her face.

“I am not leaving you,” Keira’s voice echoed, amplified by the power surging through her body.

All around them battles were being fought, but gave way before Keira as if pushed aside by an invisible wave. She passed Rafael and Chloe, fighting back-to-back and saw Adam with two men hanging off his arms on either side. Chetan threw fire bolts at his attackers, while trying to block return fire. Keira only focused on reaching her aunt.

*I’m coming. Nearly there,* she tried to communicate to Victoria.

At that very moment time slowed to a crawl. A bolt of black energy hit Victoria squarely on the chest. Her eyes widened, searched for and found Keira’s. A small, almost apologetic smile appeared around her lips. It was as if she wanted to say one last thing.

Victoria stretched her arms out to Keira—tumbled forward—and fell in a small heap at the bottom of the steps.

Keira screamed. The vortex around her disappeared as shock and horror wiped out any semblance of control she had over her powers. She ran the last few feet towards Victoria and fell on her knees beside her.

“Aunt Vic—get up. Please get up!” she cried.

Through the dust and falling rocks, the deafening roar of people locked in mortal combat, Keira could only see the woman in her arms. Everything else was blocked out, unidentifiable white noise in the background. Around them the battle raged, but the tide had turned in the Watchers’ favour as shock and horror stunned the Draaken.

Keira and Victoria were isolated in a bubble of silence. She picked shards of glass out of her aunt’s hair and softly

wiped a dust streak off her cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Vic," she whispered. "Please—please don't leave me. Just hang on—please! We'll get help. We'll call someone. Don't leave me!" she begged.

Keira rocked the still body tightly to her own; pleaded with Victoria to hold on—help was coming—and whispered words of love and encouragement.

As if from a great distance, she heard voices shouting her name, but the words had no meaning. She couldn't understand what they wanted from her.

Arms pulled at her, trying to drag her away and she resisted with everything in her. She kicked and twisted, screamed her voice raw that they had to let her go, Victoria needed her.

"Let me go, she needs me!" If she held on a little longer, everything would be all right. "Come on, Aunt Vic—get up—get up!"

Strong arms lifted her from the cobblestones and she was swept over a broad shoulder. Draaken closed in formation around her and fought their way out, through the wooden gate and over the drawbridge. All the while Keira was crying and begging them to go back, trying to get away from whomever was holding her.

The last thing she saw as she was carried away, was a tall, black-cloaked figure. Its hood was thrown back to reveal a long, pale face. Thin lips were pulled up in a sneer. The man stooped over Victoria's body and intently scanned it for signs of life. Satisfied, he straightened his back and a cold, high-pitched laugh shattered the night. Murderous hate exploded in Keira's being as she fell into dark unconsciousness.

## Chapter 15

Two men sat in shadow; part of it, yet separate. Flickering light from the fireplace threw their profiles in relief, glimpses of hooded eyes and cruel mouths briefly illuminated.

Daemon's long, elegant fingers clasped a silver cup filled with dark wine and lifted it to his pouting lips. Gold cufflinks glinted as he put the cup down and pulled at the one-half inch of shirt cuff showing from under his black jacket sleeve. His glinting eyes roamed over the Great Hall, taking in the embroidered family crests that hung from the stone walls.

"Those will have to come down," he intoned. "Time for a change in décor." The sound of his cold mirth skittered through the Hall into the courtyard. It caused the figures there to pause, shiver, and continue hastily cleaning up the remnants of the battle fought mere hours earlier.

"Yes, sir." The other shadow cracked his knuckles.

"We nearly had her," Daemon said and took another sip of his wine.

"Yes, sir," Julius said, fighting the urge to crack his knuckles again.

"Our information was flawed," Daemon mused. "The old crone's defences were stronger than anticipated. An error on our side, but not a grievous one. And the young one...ahhh, the young one—" He sighed as if in ecstasy.

Julius frowned. "Young she might be, but she could sure as hell take care of herself!"

"Hmm, yes. She has power," Daemon acknowledged. "But it is the power of the untrained. It is unpredictable."

Unstable.” He stood up and paced in front of the fireplace. What I wouldn’t do with her by my side. Such potential shouldn’t go to waste.”

“She might not be amenable to our cause, after you killed her aunt, Sir.”

“I do not see that as an obstacle. Anyone can be persuaded to any cause. With the right tools.”

Julius smirked. His boss was a very inventive persuader.

“What have we learned from this experience, my loyal lieutenant?” Without waiting for an answer, Daemon continued: “We must always learn from our mistakes to ensure that we do not make them again!” He raised his voice as if lecturing to a room full of eager students.

“One,” he lifted a finger in the air, “we have learned that the crone didn’t have a lot of time with the young one, which means that her training is incomplete. Two,” and another finger joined the first, “her lack of training makes her vulnerable. Right now she is protected by a small bunch of idiots and they are roaming the forest, looking for a way to escape. We must find them before they cross the border.”

“Sir,” Julius interrupted. “They are being tracked. The hounds have picked up their spoor. We’ll have them before the next nightfall.”

“That is a boast I sincerely hope you are able to fulfil,” Daemon drawled. “But to continue our lesson,” and he lifted a third finger. “According to one of our esteemed guests in the dungeon, Victoria did not share the location of the Book with the rest of the Council. It is unlikely that she shared it with her ward, but we will not discard that possibility. However, our guest also informed me that Victoria intended introducing the girl as their new High Priestess-in-waiting, which underscores her importance and which is why,” finger four rose up, “you must find her and bring her to me. It would be very easy for the Guardians to start believing in this girl—to have hope—and that is something I will not allow them to have.”



Julius stood to attention and nodded his understanding of Daemon's order.

They both looked up when four men appeared in the front door and shuffled towards the fireplace. "Sirs," they mumbled in unison.

"Speak!" Julius growled, impatient for news. "How goes the search?"

One of the men was shoved forward by his compatriots. Drops of sweat dotted his pale face and his hands clenched in white-knuckled fear.

"The hounds," he swallowed.

"Yes?" A warning sounded in Daemon's calm question.

"You know we could only take three, Sir. The others were injured in the battle. We—when we crossed the river, we were attacked. The wolves—they were everywhere! We came off the boats and the hounds—they—we barely made it back ourselves..." The man's voice petered off into silence.

"Where are my hounds?" Daemon asked. His voice was cold, dispassionate.

"I am sorry, Sir. They are all—they are all dead." Another man stepped forward and whispered the news.

A soft growl rumbled in Daemon's throat, then built up and ripped out of his mouth in an unstoppable torrent of hate and rage. He flung his right arm out and four bodies flew through the air, across the woven carpets and hit the stone wall on the opposite side of the room with a sickening crunch.

The scream took on a life of its own, ringing around and around the Hall, around the courtyard and out over the boundary walls, out over the silent trees that nodded their disapproval in the forest beyond.

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Keira regained consciousness in a hushed, upside-down world. Her arms swung rhythmically from side to side below

her head, which throbbed as if she had been kicked in the skull by a football player.

"Oh!" she groaned. The swaying stopped and the world flipped right-side up, as she was carefully put back on her feet. She stood for a few wobbling seconds until her legs gave way and she sunk to the ground.

"We don't have time!" A voice hissed. Keira looked up to see Simone glaring down at her.

"Give her a minute," Zina said and knelt down next to Keira. The Healer placed her hands on Keira's shoulders and there was an immediate relief from the headache.

"Can you walk?" Marco asked without looking at her. He was scanning the forest around them, his body radiating tightly coiled tension.

"Yes," she mumbled and got up with Zina's help. "Where are we?" she asked.

"In the forest, on our way to a safe place," Chloe answered. She had emerged from the trees, with Rafael close behind her.

"Let's go!" Simone insisted.

Keira could only nod and stumbled behind Marco as he moved off into the undergrowth. A small hand slip into hers and she was flooded with relief when Justin smiled up at her.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're here!" she whispered and gave him a quick hug.

"I stayed where you said I should. Marco found me when everyone came back down the road. He carried you all this way, you know. He wouldn't let Adam or anyone else take you."

"Please—tell me what happened. Did everyone get away?"

Justin hung his head. "No." Keira could hardly hear him. "Only a few of the Draaken, and none of the Council members."

"Amber?"

"I don't know. Zina said Amber's parents and the rest of the staff should have used the tunnels to escape to the village. We don't know if they made it."

Keira clenched her teeth and swore silently at the tears burning behind her eyes.

*I will not cry! All those people—Aunt Vic—deserve more from me.*

Justin gave her hand a squeeze. "Something in my eye," he mumbled and looked away.

They walked in silence for a long time before Justin could tell her that the survivors had managed to meet up at the wolves' lair and regroup. From his whispers, she learned what had happened after Marco had dragged her away from Victoria's body. He had thrown her over his shoulder and fought his way out over the draw-bridge. Justin's eyes were round with admiration as he recounted how Marco had carried her to the safety of the woods.

"We were ready to go back and attack them. But Chloe had a vision; she said we were being tracked by a lot of people with those dogs. She said we were outnumbered and reminded everyone that Victoria had said you were our priority."

"No," Keira groaned.

"Marco agreed and made us turn around. He asked the wolves to cover our backs; they gave us time to get away."

Keira winced at Justin's report. Each word was another lash to the open wound of guilt within her.

*I let her down. Now I am responsible for these people's lives as well. I am not the one they want!*

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"Shit!" Keira muttered, tripping over another gnarled tree root. Even in the twilight she could see the eyebrow Marco lifted.

"Are you all right?" he asked, overly polite.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she snapped, brushing away the hand he offered.

“Suit yourself,” he snapped back and stalked through the dense undergrowth.

Keira tried to move her legs faster and catch up, but they wouldn’t obey. It felt as if weights were strapped to her ankles; every step was an effort of will. In her exhaustion, the magnificence of the forest surrounding her went unnoticed. She stumbled past towering trees which stood like silent sentries, their canopies disappearing up into the mist. Giant ferns hid narrow passageways created by the countless unseen creatures that made this place their home. A slight breeze stirred the leaves and she became dimly aware of the earthy smell of dark soil, mushrooms, bark, and rotting vegetation.

The cacophonous screeching of birds in the branches above their heads shocked Keira out of her lethargy. The small boost of adrenaline gave her enough energy to hurry and fall back in line behind Marco’s broad back.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw vague outlines of the other people in their group as they flitted through the trees, briefly illuminated by the dim beams of remaining sunlight filtering through the branches. Layers of spongy, dead foliage, collected on the forest floor over countless years, hushed the sound of their footfalls.

Everyone seemed completely at home here; they were tense, but alert. They knew exactly what was expected of them and slipped into their roles with practised ease. It made Keira feel even more the outsider, a stranger among people who were supposed to protect her life with their own. This was a sacrifice Keira couldn’t accept. Victoria tried to explain, but they had too little time together.

The thought of Victoria’s body on the cobblestones made her want to throw her head back and howl in desolation at the sky.

She dragged her mind back as they struggled through a patch of swampy terrain and stagnant water. Putrid mud dragged at their feet and threatened to suck the last energy from their bones. Their passage stirred up a cloud of gnats unusually gifted at finding every inch of exposed flesh.

At last they were on firm ground again, everyone covered in stinking swamp mud.

"At this rate that bastard Daemon won't even need his hounds to find us. He can sniff us out himself," someone grumbled nearby.

Marco lifted a hand and signalled the group to stop. They gathered together, forming a protective circle around Keira as she gratefully sank down on a moss-covered tree stump.

"We are not far from the cave," he said. "Adam, catch up with Chetan and make sure it is safe; we'll wait here for your signal. The rest of you, fan out."

Marco watched as everyone followed his directions, then turned back to Keira. There were a few seconds of uncomfortable silence. She could see the tense set of his shoulders, his hands restlessly tapping against his thighs.

"I'm sorry." She didn't know what she was apologising for, only that she didn't want him to feel that he had to babysit her. "You don't have to stay with me. I know you want to be out there with everyone else."

He didn't answer, only scanned the trees with narrowed eyes.

His silence was an added weight of self-recrimination she already carried. Hurt, she bent forward and rested her head on her knees. She only sat up when she heard someone returning.

"It's clear," Adam said and motioned them forward. Keira gathered her reserves of strength and walked on.

After a few minutes, the forest floor began to gradually incline. The trees became sparser and she could see patches of darkening sky overhead. As the path got steeper, Keira's

trembling legs had to work even harder to carry her along. More and more frequently, Marco or Adam had to pull her over another slippery, algae-covered obstacle. She had to concentrate with everything she had to put one foot in front of the other.

Adam stopped abruptly; she nearly walked into him. There, behind the skeleton of an enormous oak tree, she could make out the dark yawn of an opening in the mountain side. They had at last reached the cave.

Chloe emerged from the gloom towards them and took Keira's arm. "Come," she said.

Keira was too tired to pretend that she could walk any further on her own, and let Chloe support her into the darkness. Though her eyes took a few moments to adjust, Chloe had obviously been here before as she didn't hesitate making her way down into the inky blackness. The air slowly got colder and Keira could smell that peculiar odour of wet rock and clay. Something flapped past her ear and she instinctively ducked. "Only bats," Chloe reassured her.

They turned a few corners then, in the distance, a faint, inviting glow appeared. They were deep in the mountainside and as the light ahead became brighter, glistening stalactites emerged from the darkness, dripping from the ceiling above them. She tried to appreciate the beauty of it, but all she wanted was to curl into a ball and sink into deep oblivion.

She wanted to forget. Forget the road which led her here, to this unimaginable place where she didn't know who she was anymore, and where Aunt Vic was dead. She gasped at the sharp pain in her heart and stumbled the last few metres towards the light, dimly realising that it was torches, burning in holders hammered into the rock chamber's walls. Chloe led her to a bed of blankets arranged in the far corner.

"It's not much, but it will do for tonight," she said. All Keira could do was mutter her gratitude and kick off her mud-caked boots before she sank onto the blankets.

Through half-closed eyes she watched the shadowy figures of her protectors make a small camp fire and unpack field rations from wooden crates they dragged from a hidden alcove. Then she slept.

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“I’m not sure she can make it out of here. She is a liability to us right now,” Rafael said to Marco, who crouched next to him, sorting through field rations.

Marco glanced over at Keira where she lay against the far wall. “We have to trust Victoria. It is all we have. Besides, we all saw what she is capable of back at the castle.”

“Marco,” Rafael hesitated, “How did they get in? I thought our defences were impenetrable?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. There is only one explanation,” Marco growled.

“You don’t think someone from the inside—?” Rafael asked in a low whisper.

Conflicting emotions crossed Marco’s face. “I don’t want to believe that, but right now, it’s the only thing that makes sense.” He gripped Rafael’s arm. “Keep this to yourself. We have no proof.”

Rafael nodded and got up. “I’ll take first watch,” he mumbled and walked off to the cave entrance.

## Chapter 16

Marco opened his eyes, instantly awake. He'd had only a few hours' sleep after taking his turn at sentry duty. He sat up and looked at Keira's corner of the chamber. Her blankets were rumpled, but she wasn't there. Adrenaline pumping, he jumped up and scanned the cave. He closed his eyes in relief when he saw her sitting on the other side of the fire, having a breakfast of left-overs from last night.

He sat down beside her, giving her a quick once-over. "Did you manage any sleep?" he asked, helping himself to some of the food.

"Not really," she said and put the empty bowl down beside her. "Marco, what are we going to do? I mean, what is the plan?"

Marco stared into the remnants of the fire and took a while to answer. "The plan is to follow Victoria's instructions. She ordered the Draaken to protect you, at all costs. That means you and I stay together."

"No! I can't allow anyone else to get hurt. I won't!"

"You don't have a choice," Marco glared. "I lost friends in that battle. Brian, Frank—the Council members are all dead, or will be very soon now that Daemon has his hands on them. I will be damned if I allow him to capture you as well."

Keira fought the urge to close her eyes and withdraw into herself as the names of those lost lashed her conscience. Instead, she looked at him in silence. Dark circles lay heavy under his eyes and his jaw clenched under black stubble. She saw the grief he couldn't hide, even though he tried very hard to.



The last conversation she had with Victoria replayed in her mind. Her aunt must have been so disappointed. There were no recriminations, just a request to stay and spend more time with her. Keira wished she could go back. Maybe if she had listened, she would have changed her mind. Was it really necessary to be so adamant? It wouldn't have changed the fact that the battle happened, but at least then Victoria would have gone into it with the knowledge that Keira wasn't a traitor. Because that is how she felt. Like a traitor to everything her aunt stood for.

"Our first priority is to get everyone out of these woods alive," Marco continued. "They have to reach their Families and reorganise."

"Marco—" Keira didn't want to ask a stupid question, but the solution seemed so obvious. "Why don't we just call someone to come and fetch us—with a helicopter—or something? Surely one of you has a mobile phone?"

He frowned and took a while to answer. "I keep forgetting that you don't know—you didn't grow up with this around you all the time."

"No, I didn't. And I don't like the fact that I don't know the *rules*!" Keira was annoyed and didn't mind showing it.

He ignored her tone and explained, "Electronics don't work in these woods, the magick currents are too strong. It is said all the currents crossing the Earth converge here."

"Oh," Keira said. "But, there is electricity at the castle?"

"Only because the Council members have raised a shield around its walls, and there are generators to keep things going."

"This shield—was it up when Daemon attacked? Wasn't it supposed to protect us?"

"Yes and yes," Marco said. "And before you ask, I don't know how he got through."

Keira wanted to push it, she wanted more information, but his clipped tone discouraged further questions.

“Marco,” she tried another tact. “I understand your loyalty to Aunt Vic, really, I do; but surely she would understand that everything has changed now. She wouldn’t expect us to follow her orders if it puts us in danger. You know she wouldn’t. Besides, I overheard you and Rafael talking last night. You think someone let Daemon into the castle. One of the Guardians—” Her voice caught, the mere thought seemed monstrous.

“Please keep your voice down,” Marco said and looked around. “It is a possibility,” he acknowledged.

“Then, it is a possibility that the person who betrayed us is here, in this group?”

He looked at her, frowning. “Keira, please don’t—”

“Don’t patronise me, Marco,” she interrupted him. “I’m in the middle of the woods, somewhere in Europe, with a bunch of people I don’t know. I lost the one person who believed in me and I seriously feel like freaking out right now. If you are going to start lying to me, I might just lose it.” Keira crossed her arms and tried not to cry.

“We all lost someone in that battle.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It means that we only have each other to rely on to get out of here. If you want me to be part of this team, you have to trust me.”

He was silent, deep in thought. “Yes, it is possible. If we were betrayed from the inside, that person could be here with us.”

“So doesn’t it make more sense for us to split up? Then the spy would be isolated, not able to report on what the group is doing?” she asked.

He looked at her intently. She could see him calculating all the options. The Draaken would be more effective in smaller groups, slipping through the forest and trying to reach civilisation. A big group travelling together left too many signs of their passing and made it easier for Daemon’s trackers to follow them.

"I agree," he said, and Keira's shoulders slumped in relief. "I'll have to convince the others, though."

*Good, she thought. If we split up, more of them have a chance at getting away.*

"I will call everyone together." Marco walked off to summon the men and women to the inner chamber.

A few moments later, everyone was gathered around. They were dressed in combat fatigues, claimed from the crates stored in the cave for this exact purpose. The mood was subdued, but alert.

"Rafael and Chloe are outside, by the entrance," Zina informed Marco. "She's trying to see where the Watchers are."

He nodded and began: "Right. We are all aware of who and what are tracking us. We have to get out and warn those Families still loyal to the Council. They have to prepare themselves for what is to come. Victoria trained us for war, even though she hoped we'd stop Daemon before it came to that. She also trained us to think—to be flexible—to be able to retreat and regroup, which is exactly what we're going to do now. I know the original plan was for all of us to stay together, to protect Keira at all costs. That was Victoria's wish." He had to stop and bowed his head. Stifled sobs sounded from the group about him.

After a moment, he looked up again, his eyes as cold as the Arctic sea. "I would like nothing better than to go back, avenge her death, and that of our friends. But it will lead to all of our ruin. The time will come for us to face Daemon. That time is not today."

Marco waited for everyone to indicate their concurrence and continued: "We are too conspicuous travelling together. We will split up into smaller groups of two and get out of the forest as fast as possible. You have to get to your respective Families. Warn them, get them organised. Most of the Guardians can fight if needs be. If you have Healers in your Family, have them on close standby. The Draaken will then

regroup at the Santana Family ranch in Argentina. We'll use it as our head quarters. Once there, we'll reassess and decide on our next move. Agreed?"

Before anyone could answer, Simone said, "Marco, no disrespect, but Victoria gave us clear orders to stay with Keira and protect her at all costs. How are we going to do that when we are spread out all over the forest?"

Keira looked at her in surprise. She thought that Marco had made it clear, they'd be safer in smaller groups. Besides, he said that Victoria had trained them to adapt to changing situations.

Simone stood next to Marco and placed her hand on his arm. She managed to look elegant, even in her khaki camouflage. "We are stronger as a group," she said and looked around at everyone. "Our powers work better when they feed off of the collective energy."

No one had a chance to reply. Zina gasped as Rafael stumbled into the chamber. He carried Chloe in his arms, her head lolled backward.

"What happened?" Marco jumped forward and helped his brother lay Chloe on a blanket. A swell of raised voices ran through the rocky chamber. Everyone pushed forward, their faces filled with dread. They knew the risks Chloe took, especially when scrying for a formidable enemy like Daemon. She was the most powerful Seer the Guardians had in centuries. She didn't need a medium, like a crystal ball, or reflective water, to scry. She could connect her mind directly to the Akasha and travel on its currents at will to different people and places. That ability came with severe dangers. There was no barrier between her and the person she was Seeing.

"I don't know," Rafael answered Marco. "She was scrying—started convulsing—I've never seen this happen to her before, my shield wasn't enough!" His voice was frantic as he clung to Chloe's hand.

“Rafael, did she say anything?” Marco asked. “We need to know if she saw anything!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” Rafael shouted at his brother.

Zina pushed through the circle and knelt next to Chloe. Her presence soothed Rafael and he calmed his ragged breathing. Holding both her hands a few inches over Chloe’s body, the Healer scanned her from head to toe. Small sparks of light jumped from Zina’s hands to Chloe’s body. The smell of peppermint lingered in the air.

Magick was a part of life for this group of people and Keira couldn’t get enough of it. She stood closer, drawn like a desert nomad to water.

After a few minutes, Chloe slowly opened her eyes. She was still dazed and unsteady when Rafael helped her to sit up, but at least she was conscious.

Marco knelt next to her. “Chloe, I’m sorry, but it is vital that we know what happened out there. Did you see anything?” The urgency in his voice got through to the Seer and she focused on him. That far-away look was still there, but she answered him clearly. “I saw them coming, they are near. The first group was stopped by the wolves, but the second is on its way.”

At this news, the group all started talking at once, trying to decide what to do next. Marco held up his hand and there was instant silence.

Chloe continued. “I got past his defences, but then he trapped me—and—and I couldn’t get back! I fought and fought, but he was toying with me! Then he let me go. He wanted me to come back and tell you what I saw.” She covered her face with her hands, sobbing softly. Rafael put his arms around her and rocked her gently, whispering encouragements in her ear.

“Chloe’s information decides it.” Marco fixed the group’s attention back on the matter at hand. “We will split up, no more than two in a group. Pack only essential gear and some

food, there are backpacks in one of the crates. Be fast. Zina's magick would have left its signature in the Akasha. Daemon will know where we are. We leave in ten minutes!"

Heads nodded in agreement. They were trained for an event such as this and they knew how to move with speed. Everyone was packed and ready to go before the time was up.

"Excuse me," Keira stepped forward.

"Yes?" Marco asked.

"Well, everyone seems to have sorted themselves out already," Keira said, feeling a bit like the last kid to get picked for the football team. "I'm not quite sure which group I should be joining."

"That's because it's obvious. You're coming with me." Marco walked over to the crates, picked up two backpacks and started stowing gear with determined efficiency.

Keira looked around at the people preparing to leave. Justin sat with Chloe, holding her hand, while Rafael rummaged in a crate. Adam helped Zina adjust her backpack. Simone, Yoshi and Chetan stood waiting, ready to leave.

All of their lives were uprooted, devastated. They were going back to their Families, not knowing what to expect. Had Daemon's allies struck at them the same time as his attack on the Council? There was no way of knowing, at least not until they got out of the forest. Keira's stomach clenched at the thought of her parents and Alison and Sammy being in danger. But surely not? They were not magickal and had no knowledge about the Guardians. Would that be enough to keep them safe?

An image of a tall, thin man, laughing over Victoria's body in the castle courtyard flashed through her mind.

"One more thing," she addressed Marco's back.

"Yes, what is it?" He turned around, clearly irritated by the interruption.

“Is Daemon the one who killed Victoria? The one who was laughing, at the end?” Keira asked.

The irritation disappeared from his voice and eyes. “Yes, that was him,” he answered.

“Thank you. That is all I needed,” Keira said. Her voice was controlled and even, but with an undercurrent of steel.

At that moment, she made a vow to herself, and to the Guardians: No one would ever harm someone she cared for again.

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Marco caught a quick flash of brilliant green eyes filled with fury, as Keira bent down to pick up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. He suddenly remembered when Victoria told him that there was much more to Keira than anyone suspected. For some reason, in this moment, the idea didn’t seem as farfetched as it had back then.

The Draaken grouped around him and Keira as he spread a map out on the cave floor. “We are here, just east of the border between the Czech Republic and Germany.” He pointed to a spot on the map. “You have to travel west and cross over into Germany. Move fast, but stay safe. Avoid confrontation; the goal is to get news to your Families and not get killed.”

“But Marco,” Rafael interrupted. “The Elders were at the castle. The Families are now leaderless. Who is going to make decisions for them?”

Marco was silent for a moment, then answered: “In the entire history of the Guardians, it has never been necessary to put this into practice. But the law states that, in the event that the entire Council is unable to govern, the Draaken steps in.”

A shocked silence greeted his words.

“Holy shit!” Adam exclaimed. “That means—us?” The big Australian looked dumbfounded.

“Marco, are you sure? The Council members might still be alive. Daemon might not have killed them,” Zina said.

“I don’t believe Daemon would leave any of them alive. But even if he did, they are not in a position to help us—to make decisions for the Guardians,” Marco answered. “As members of the Draaken, you all knew that you were being trained to take over from your Family Leaders.”

“Yes, but that was going to happen *years* from now, when they retired...or something,” Adam said.

“Well, the ‘something’ has just happened,” Marco said, “and we have to step up. Your duty is to get to your Families, get those who can fight organised. Move the rest to your safe houses. Then come to Argentina. We will spearhead our attack from there.”

“What if Daemon has attacked our families already, or if the locations of our safe houses have been compromised?” Chetan voiced everyone’s silent concern.

“We can only hope that he hasn’t, that he’s been too busy scheming to overthrow the Council to pay attention to the Families. But it will be your decision. If your Family doesn’t have enough fighters, or if there is any indication that the Watchers have been sniffing around the safe houses, you bring your people to Argentina.”

Marco looked each of the Draaken in the eye. “Now go,” he said. “Go and do what you have to.”

Two by two, they took leave of each other, turned around and slipped out of the cave’s entrance, into the forest below.

Soon, only Rafael and Chloe, Marco, Keira, and Justin were left. The brothers looked at each other.

“Are you going ahead with it?” Rafael asked.

“Yes, there is no other way,” Marco replied.

Keira had stayed unnoticed off to one side until then. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Chloe frowned at her partner. “Rafael?” she questioned.

Marco looked down at Justin. “You have to go with Rafael and Chloe. Keira and I have somewhere else to go,” he said



and put his hand on the young boy's shoulder.

"What-?" Keira and Justin cried out simultaneously.

"I want to stay with you! I can help, I won't be in the way!" Justin begged, distressed at the thought of leaving his hero and new friend behind.

"You said we have to get across the border; that the Draaken has to reach their Families," Keira argued.

"I never said that you and I would join them," Marco replied. "I was wondering how to convince them we had to split up. Your plan made it possible."

"No—that's—what are you saying!" Keira spluttered.

"Keira," Marco said. "Victoria made me promise that if something should—if for some reason she was unable to continue with your training, I would take you to someone else who could."

She could only stare at him in shock.

"No," she found her voice. "I must go home. I have plans. I can't go off with you just because you say so!"

Marco stepped closer to her. He reached out a hand as if to brush her cheek, but she flinched back. Anger radiated from her and a determined frown furrowed her brows.

"I think I know what your plans are. You want revenge, don't you? So do I. But for now, we have no choice." Marco folded up the map, put it in his pocket and swung a heavy-looking backpack over his shoulders with ease.

The brothers gripped each other's right forearms in a tight parting. "Good luck," each said, and Rafael turned to go. Justin and Chloe followed him out with last concerned looks at Keira.

Keira watched them go and then turned on Marco, fists on her hips. "Take me home!" she demanded.

"That is not possible," he answered calmly.

"Then I'll find my own way. I don't need you. I've been in woods before." She picked up the bag he had packed for her and walked to the cave's entrance.

“Woods filled with magick shields and traps? Moving as fast as possible while you have the army of an enemy more powerful than you can imagine on your heels? Even if you do get out of the woods, how will you get home? And most importantly, are you willing to put your parents and friends at risk?” He fired the questions at her in rapid succession.

The last question stopped her in her tracks.

“What do you mean, ‘put my family and friends at risk?’”

“By now Daemon knows everything there is to know about you. Where you live, who your parents are, the names and addresses of your friends. They will be under constant surveillance and the moment you show your face, everyone will be in danger,” he continued in a softer voice.

Keira stared at him in stunned silence. The magnitude of the situation finally began to sink in. Earlier, everything had passed in a blur and a part of her held onto the belief—the hope—that she’d be able to pick up her life in London where she’d left it, after she had taken revenge on Daemon, of course. She had the vague idea that, once he’d been taken care of, she’d have that talk with her parents and then travel the world with her camera in hand. She’d use Alison’s apartment as her base, visiting her friends from time to time, and then be off again to the next exotic destination.

Now, that hope seemed beyond naïve, even stupid. She shook her head in mute despair. If Victoria couldn’t defeat Daemon, how did she ever think she’d be able to? Besides that, the thought of Alison and Sammy being threatened because of her—the thought of her parents in danger—robbed Keira of her breath and ability to think.

Marco watched her in silent sympathy. “Keira,” he said.

“Yes?” she asked, forlorn.

“The only way to keep them safe is for you to disappear for a while. Let Daemon think he has won, that he has chased you into hiding.”

“Which would be true,” she answered.

“Yes, but then you can return on your own terms, not his. And you will return, Keira, when you are ready and able to deal with him. When we have all regrouped and are together again. Keira, he may have won the battle, but he has not won the war!”

She looked up. His eyes were filled with determination and compassion. Underlying that was a deep sadness, and Keira realised she had been unfair to him. She had let him carry the burden of her safety while he hadn't yet grieved for Victoria and his friends.

“You miss her, too,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he acknowledged. “And the best way to honour her memory is for me to keep my promise to her, do my duty, and keep you safe.”

“Victoria...how will you...”

He understood, without her having to say more.

“We will wait a while and then announce that there was an accident. It is unfortunate, but we've had to do this before, for other Guardians,” his voice was businesslike but she heard the pain.

“My friends—parents—they expect me back. They will be worried,” Keira murmured the last of her objections.

“They don't expect you back for a few days, right? They know you're in the Czech Republic, but not exactly where. After about a week, they will be contacted. We'll convince them that you need more time alone, especially in light of Victoria's death.”

She could only nod her acceptance of the inevitable.

He held out his hand. “Now, let's go.”

She hesitated, then took his hand in hers and together they left the cave.

## Chapter 17

The faint drip-dripping of water had long since failed to register with the old man; so had the soft rustling of the rats' claws on the dank stone floor. He didn't know where they came in. He had given up trying to find a crack in the wall. The small room had no windows and the heavy, solid wood door, no bars.

He didn't know how long he had been in the cell; it could have been hours, or days. Time had a curious way of slipping away when you are surrounded by unrelenting, solid darkness, with only fear and the screams of fellow prisoners for company. He knew those voices even though terror robbed them of all humanity. Those voices had belonged to life-long colleagues and friends. They had been silent for a while now, and he feared that he was the last one.

The stomping of heavy boots approached from the distance, then stopped in front of his cell. Keys rattled and the door was kicked open. Two pairs of arms grabbed him roughly and pulled him to his feet.

"Shit, he stinks," a voice rasped.

"The boss ain't said nothin' about cleaning him up, just to bring him," another replied.

The old man squinted against the sudden glare of light as he was dragged up a seemingly endless spiral staircase. Eventually, the stairs levelled out and they passed through rooms getting progressively richer in décor while his guards muttered and complained about his redolence.

At last they stopped. The old man dropped to his knees as his legs were too weak to support even his frail body. He

could only stare at the plush, red carpet in front of him. A pair of gleaming, black leather shoes came into view.

"Gentlemen, please help our guest to a seat." The tone was pleasant but it left the old man with a growing dread.

The handlers jerked him up and pushed him into a chair. It wasn't one he recognised, Victoria didn't like this style, so he didn't feel bad when his filthy clothes left brown streaks on the velvet upholstery.

The black shoes moved to a chair opposite him; a pair of soft white hands with carefully groomed nails rested on a knee.

"Welcome to my humble abode, Mr Savelli."

The old man finally looked up and met his nemesis' eyes. "*Bastardo!*" He tried to spit out of his dry mouth.

"Now, now," Daemon tut-tutted. "There is no need for name calling. Look around, old man; do you like what I've done with the place?"

They were in the Great Hall of the Guardians' castle. All the embroidered family crests were gone from the walls and above the fireplace, where the Wilde family crest used to be, a huge painting of Daemon surveyed the room. Gilded and stuffed French furniture replaced the comfortable couches and big wooden table around which the Council used to gather.

"This place will *never* be yours!" Savelli croaked in disgust.

"Well, possession is nine-tenths of the law," Daemon smiled congenially. "But come, let's not waste more time. The sooner you tell me what I want to know, the sooner you can get out of here and go back to your villa in Italy."

Savelli merely cackled with glee. "So! My friends didn't give you what you want, *eccellente!*"

The blow that struck the old man's head lifted him out of the chair and left him sprawling on the red carpet. He lay, gasping for air, desperately trying to hang on to consciousness.

Daemon bent over him, rubbing his knuckles, all traces of civility gone from his face. "Your friends are all *dead!*" he hissed. He turned away and tugged the sleeves of his suit down. From his breast pocket, he took a snow-white handkerchief and polished the blood off of the heavy silver signet ring on his right hand.

"Some of your friends put up a brave fight, they were quite feisty. I could almost admire that. Of course their struggles only prolonged the inevitable and caused them so much more pain than what was strictly necessary. But, alas, it became clear that none of them had the information I required," Daemon continued while slowly walking up and down past the old man, his hands clasped behind his back.

"However, your most recent expired colleague did mention that you and the old crone had a—*liaison*—in your younger days. During your pillow talk, she didn't, by any chance, mention something about an old book, did she?" Daemon stopped in front of the prone figure on the floor, his cruel eyes fixed intently on the haggard face below him.

"Book? What book?" The old man gasped.

"Oh, you know, the one with the accumulated knowledge of all the Leaders of the Guardians over the past eons—*that* book," Daemon said in a pleasant, casual voice.

"No...book..."

"Don't tell me 'no Book.' I *know* about the Book and I want it. Now tell me where...it...is!" Daemon punctuated his last words with a vicious kick to the old man's ribs with the sharp point of his expensive leather shoes.

When he got no reply, he stretched his arms out over the body on the floor and hissed an incantation in an ancient language. Savelli gasped and opened his eyes.

"You can bring me back, *bastardo*, but you cannot keep me here for long!"

"I can keep you here long enough to find out what I need to know. Now. TALK!"

At the command, Savelli's eyes rolled back in his head and he answered in a deep and commanding voice:

*"Earth, fire, water, air.*

*The Akasha condemns those who dare.*

*Deep within, the wisdom concealed.*

*To the One, it be revealed."*

With that, Savelli's eyes refocused on Daemon. He breathed a shuddering breath and in a tired voice he said, "You will keep me no longer, spawn of the devil. I curse you and your horde to everlasting banishment to the deepest reaches of the Void." Then, his head lolled to the side and his eyes saw no more.

"Bloody useless sack of shit!" Daemon swore in frustrated rage. Soft mutters from his two handlers made him turn on them in fury. "What are you whispering about?" he snarled.

"Sir..." one spoke up hesitantly. "The old man's curse, he is—was a member of Council. They could do those things, I mean, banish us—"

A shape, unseen till now, detached itself from a shadowy corner and slinked closer.

"Curses made with dying breaths are matters of concern, Sir," Julius said.

"Don't you start acting like a coward as well, Julius," Daemon snapped. "Get rid of that," he pointed to the body on the floor and dismissed the two handlers.

Julius watched Daemon from under heavy, hooded eyes. "Sir, if word of this gets out it could affect morale around here. Most of the Families only pledged allegiance because you promised them everlasting glory, etcetera, etcetera. You've just killed the last Council member and we are no closer to the Book."

Daemon lost his last remaining shred of patience, pounced on Julius and grabbed his throat in a claw-like grip.

"I am getting slightly annoyed with your attitude, Julius," he spat in his subordinate's face. "Please remember:

no one is irreplaceable.”

He pushed Julius away and pulled at his sleeves. His lieutenant was bent over and gasping for breath.

“The morale of our troops is your problem, Julius. That is why I put you in charge. Leave the Book to me. Savelli might not have told me where exactly it is, but he pointed me in the right direction. It is now clear that we need to find this Keira, at any cost. How we do that, I will leave to your twisted mind to figure out. And Julius, I did mean *any* cost!”

“Yes, Sir!” Julius rasped through his burning throat.

“Now, you go and take care of the rabble. I will be in the library. That old man’s riddle might have given us an extra clue. And I don’t want to be disturbed,” Daemon commanded and stalked off.

“Yes, Sir,” Julius whispered, an uncharacteristic, thoughtful expression on his face. “You go sit with your dusty manuscripts. There is more than one way to skin a cat, and once that book is found, there is more than one person who can use it.”



## Chapter 18

Keira watched as Marco took out a small, camouflaged tent from his bag. Nightfall was approaching and, when they came upon a slight dip in the terrain, he suggested they stop for the night. Keira was grateful to put her backpack down and flex her shoulders. She suppressed a grimace as her back spasmed. There was no way she was letting Marco see her discomfort.

He set a fast pace during the day and she vowed silently to herself to keep up, ignoring her exhaustion and aching feet. "Are you sure we can stop?" she asked. "What about Daemon's people?"

"They have to stop and rest as well. Besides, they expect us to go to the border," he answered.

"Oh," she mumbled, wishing for the umpteenth time they really were headed in that direction.

"We won't be able to make a fire, but at least we have the tent and sleeping bags. Check your backpack, there's some dried fruit and energy bars in there. That will have to be dinner," Marco said as he set about clearing the gully of twigs.

Keira opened her pack and found a few waterproof bags filled with trail food. She brushed off a flat rock nearby and arranged their dinner on it. It didn't look very appetizing, but she knew she needed the energy. While nibbling on a handful of nuts, Keira took in their surroundings. The forest was dark, hushed and foreign, different from the one at home that was filled with small animal sounds and happy twitters from the birds. She was glad she was not alone in this place.

"Can I help?" she asked, unnerved by the silence. She felt like she should be doing something to keep busy.

"No, it's okay." He had taken his jacket off. A black t-shirt did nothing to hide the subtle flex of his muscles as he worked. His strong hands deftly assembled flexible rods to erect the small heap of fabric at his feet.

As she watched him work, the photographer in her couldn't help but admire the lines and angular planes of his body. The way his wide shoulders tapered off to slim hips and into muscled legs.

*I wish I had my camera*, she thought; then looked down in shy confusion when he turned and walked back to her.

He sat down on the leaf-covered ground and stretched his long legs out with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Energy bar?" she asked and held one out to him.

"Thanks."

They ate in a silence that stretched on and on. Keira thought desperately of something to talk about. During the hike there was no time for conversation; now, she felt a sudden unease in the company of this brooding man reclining next to her in apparent comfort. She wanted to ask him about his life, about his magick, and about his family. There were a million things she wanted to know. What was it like to go to school at the castle, to be a Draaken? She felt that she had only scratched the surface with Chloe and Justin. There was so much more, a whole world she had never known existed.

She sneaked a glance at him and saw him frown. "What's the matter?"

"The matter?"

"Oh...yes. Except the obvious, of course."

He gave a short laugh. "Yes, except for the obvious," he agreed. "Well, there is also the fact that I'm looking for a place I'm not sure exists, and even if I find it, I'm not sure we'll be welcome."

“What do you mean? Don’t you know where we’re going?”

“I don’t want to concern you with this.”

“Stop it right there,” she said. “I thought I asked you to trust me—that we agreed there would be no more secrets.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know where we are and I know where we are going. What I don’t know is whether the person we’re supposed to meet will make him or herself known to us.” His voice was tight with frustration.

“I think you have to start at the beginning, please,” Keira said.

He took a while to answer her.

“Victoria gave me instructions,” he began.

“I know that already. She expected people to protect my life with their own.” Anger and frustration at the thought crept into her voice yet again.

“Yes, there is that. But she also said that I have to take you to the person who would train you, if she couldn’t. She said to keep walking east from the castle, until we were found.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“So, who is supposed to meet us? Do you know?”

“No, but there are legends,” Marco hesitated.

“Come on! Legends?” Keira was incredulous. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, after all that’s happened. The next thing you’re going to tell me is that we’ll be transported on the back of unicorns off to Oz!”

“You can’t ride unicorns, they don’t allow it,” he answered with a poker face.

“You can’t be serious,” she whispered.

Marco burst out laughing. “No, I’m not,” he admitted, still chuckling. “But there are stories. The old books say there is a place in these woods where the magick currents of the Earth meet. Also that it can’t be found. It finds you.”

"And you think that this is the place Victoria was speaking of?" Keira asked.

"I don't know," he said and threw a twig away from him in frustration. "Victoria was like a mother to us all, yet she had so many secrets."

"I wish I had more time with her," Keira said, her voice soft with emotion. "I didn't know what she was. I didn't know what I was." She shook her shoulders as if to get rid of unwanted memories and asked, "Did you always know you were—you know—magickal?"

"Yes," he said. "Rafael, Adriana, and I always knew. Our parents were very active in the Guardians' community. My father was Leader of the Santana Family."

"Adriana was your sister?" Keira asked.

He was silent for a long time.

"I'm sorry," Keira said. "I didn't mean to pry. Justin told me."

"It's okay," he said. "Yes, she was our sister and Justin's mother. Adriana and her husband were travelling home after a mission in Spain. They were killed in a car crash."

Keira cursed herself for even mentioning the subject. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"My mother wasn't well and the shock...she died soon after," Marco continued as if he hadn't heard her. "A few months later, my father was found in one of our horse paddocks, trampled to death."

Keira sat in shocked silence. She didn't know what to say. She wanted to reach out and touch him, put her arms around him, but she was scared, uncertain how to reach through the isolation surrounding him.

"The police wrote it all off as a series of accidents. But Rafael and I did our own investigations. Adriana's car had been tampered with. And my father—there is no way in hell those horses would have trampled him. He raised them by hand from birth."

"Please, we don't have to talk about it," Keira tried to stop him.

His eyes were bleak when he looked at her. "I wish we knew about you then," he said. "We could have asked you talk to the horses; find out what really happened. We would have had proof that Daemon killed my family."

"Daemon? You think that he..?"

"I know he did," Marco growled. "He was in love with Adriana; followed her around like a love-sick puppy all through Initiation School. She never wanted anything to do with him. After graduation, we all got accepted into the Draaken. He made it his mission to become the next Commander, as if that would prove to her that he was good enough," Marco made a disparaging noise.

"Well, he wasn't. I was chosen and he vowed revenge. He disappeared and we carried on with our lives. Adriana married Guido; they had Justin. We heard rumours of what he was up to, dabbling in black magick, trying covertly to convince Council members to change the Guardians' mission; to change its focus from guarding the Akasha to exploring and manipulating it. Then, Daemon's family Council member went missing, and Daemon took his place. Well, he revelled in his new position and openly declared his intentions. My father, Victoria, and a couple of older Council members fought him at each meeting, but Daemon managed to convert a few Families with his promises of glory. Those who continued to resist suffered inexplicable 'accidents.' He pushed for having the Draaken disbanded and formed the Watchers... And here we are."

"I am so sorry," was all that Keira could say again.

"Yeah, me too," he said. "But this war is not over. It has only just started."

"I am beginning to understand that. I know it is useless to wish things were different, but if only Victoria had told me sooner."

“She regretted her decision, Keira. But at the time, it was the only option.” Marco reached out and took her hand in his. His strong brown fingers entwined with hers and she could feel hard calluses at the base of his fingers.

A heat was growing between their palms. A tingling sensation travelled up her wrist and arm. It moved into her chest and she was glad she was sitting down; her body felt as if it had liquefied.

Keira came back to reality with a startled gasp as Marco wrenched his hand out of hers. He was suddenly six feet away from her, shoulders hunched, hands clenched in fists at his sides. Even from the distance she could hear his ragged breathing as he struggled for control.

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” he answered. He shook his shoulders and walked closer, but still stopped a couple of feet away from her.

*Nothing? That was not ‘nothing,’* Keira thought. Even that first time he held her in his arms in front of Harrods, she felt something. She had managed to dismiss it, though. After all, what did she know about men? Apparently, not enough. The boys from St. Vincent’s, her own school’s neighbour, didn’t hold much appeal, even though her friends found them entertaining. There was a summer holiday at Sammy’s parents’ house in the Caribbean, when she’d fallen madly in love with a hunky lifeguard. But even that fizzled out as soon as she got home. Besides, her lukewarm response to his fumbling kisses was nothing compared to her body’s reaction when Marco touched her.

She was about to insist on an answer when a cawing sound erupted above their heads. A black raven sat on a branch, looking at them curiously.

“It can’t be,” Keira whispered and the raven answered her with another loud caw. “Nagwa!” she cried and ran to stand underneath the tree. She stretched out her arms and the raven glided down to perch on her shoulder. He sat and

preened his feathers, as if he had all the right in the world to be there.

"I assume you know each other?" Marco asked and strolled closer, hands in his pockets.

"Yes, he is my oldest friend," Keira answered and crooned soft words of endearment to the bird. "He was my *only* friend for a very long time. I don't understand, how could this be possible? The last time I saw him was at my home, back in England, many years ago. He taught me about the wind and the trees, the animals that lived in the forests surrounding our estate," Keira smiled. "He also told me never to show anyone what I could do, but I had to learn that the hard way. He came with me to school for a while, but I had to ask him to leave," her voice caught at those unhappy memories.

"I was so angry at Aunt Vic when she told me there were other people like me. When she told me there was a school... I lost it. Doesn't make sense, does it? I should have been happy. She must have thought I was acting like a complete brat."

"She'd never have thought that," Marco reassured her. "She told me how she regretted not being able to bring you to the school. She admired your guts and determination."

Keira gave a small laugh. "What guts? Here I am, running away from the man who killed her."

*And I refused when she asked me to join the Guardians, to help them against their enemy,* Keira thought. She didn't say that to Marco, though. It was bad enough to remember the disappointment in Aunt Vic's eyes; she didn't want to see it in Marco's as well.

"Sometimes it takes more courage to turn away from a fight than to start one," Marco said.

Keira silently stroked Nagwa's glossy black feathers. She didn't feel like getting into a discussion about her past. There was no need to rehash it. The time for hiding in closets and feeling sorry for herself has passed.

She encouraged the raven to hop onto her wrist, then held him out in front of her and stared at the one black eye that was turned in her direction. "I have some questions for you, mister," she said, mock stern.

The only answer she got was a soft caw and the raven continued to groom his feathers.

"There has to be a reason he showed up here," Marco said.

"Well, when I was a child, he helped me in many ways. He used to spy on the maids and nannies for me. He would tell me when they were coming, so I could find places to hide."

Marco looked at the raven. "Could you ask him to do that for us now?"

A loud caw erupted from the raven and he softly pecked at Keira's hand.

"I think he already has," Keira said. She looked around, then walked to the tent and sat down in front of it. "I will need a few minutes," she said.

Marco nodded. "Do what you need to do, I'll keep watch," he said and walked a short distance off to a nearby tree trunk where he made himself comfortable.

Nagwa hopped onto Keira's knee and cocked his head in her direction, staring his unblinking stare.

"Okay my friend, let's see if we can still do this," Keira whispered. Almost immediately she could feel that old, familiar stillness spread through her body. She allowed her gaze to soften as it rested on the raven, then she reached out with her thoughts, letting them wander at will.

At first, the images were blurred, hazy as if seen from a great distance. Then they sharpened and, as if floating above the scene, Keira watched Nagwa's vision unfold.

*A group of black cloaked figures crossed a river on small boats. Each figure accompanied by a snarling dog, monstrous in size and viciousness. The boats touched the opposite bank, people and dogs jumped out. As soon as*



*their feet touched ground, howling erupted from all sides. Grey fur flashed past as the wolf pack attacked. Screams and growls mixed, and then it was quiet. Four figures ran back to a boat on the bank, chased by the powerful wolves. But the figures made it and rowed back across the river.*

The scene shifted.

*The groups they took leave of at the cave crossed the border into Germany at different places. Justin, holding Chloe and Rafael's hands, walked into a hamlet.*

Shift.

*Somewhere else, Simone slipped into the passenger seat of a yellow sports car waiting in a layby near the woods and raced off in the direction of Frankfurt.*

Shift.

*Adam and Yoshi climbing down a rock face, walking into a Herberg and being welcomed by a friendly proprietor.*

Shift.

*Glimpses of Chetan's shadow moving through the forest, at home in his surroundings, then getting into a small motorboat and drifting down a wide river.*

Nagwa blinked and the connection between them was broken. Keira sank back, exhausted by the effort it took to maintain the link with the raven. She called out to Marco and waved him over.

"I saw Rafael, they are all right. Everyone crossed the border; they are on their way to Frankfurt."

Marco's shoulders slumped in relief. He wiped his hand over his face and Keira realised how concerned he must have been for his brother—his friends.

"There is more," she continued. "He confirmed what Chloe saw. The first group that followed us had those monster dogs; they crossed the river at the same place we did, but the wolves were waiting. I don't think any of the dogs survived, but four people made it back to a boat. They returned to the castle."

"I could kiss that bird!" Marco grinned at Keira.

As if in answer, Nagwa flapped his wings and flew off to a tree out of reach. Marco and Keira burst out laughing, sharing the relief and joy of knowing their friends were safe.

"A glass of champagne would be nice right now," Keira smiled.

"I'll buy you a case of the best there is when this is over," Marco promised.

"Add a box of chocolate éclairs to that and you're on!" Keira accepted.

"I'll hold you to that," Marco said, an unreadable expression in his eyes. "But now, we have to get some rest. We have another long walk ahead of us tomorrow."

Keira stood up and stretched her arms out above her head. Her muscles were stiff and she realised just how tired she was.

Marco crawled into the tent and lay down on one of the sleeping bags he had thrown open on the ground. Keira peeked in through the flap, hesitant to enter. Marco's body filled the small space of the two-man tent and she had a sudden flash of memory of the glowing feeling between their palms.

"Come on," he said, holding the flap open wider for her to enter.

She pretended to struggle with her boots' laces, needing the time to calm her mind, then crawled into the tent. She couldn't help but notice the subtle shift of his body away from her as she laid down on her sleeping bag.

*It doesn't matter. I don't care.*

She was annoyed at her confused feelings and his apparent need to put distance between them.

"Sleep well," Marco said over his shoulder as he turned his back to her. Moments later she could hear his deep, even breathing.

Keira stared at the green waterproof nylon of the tent's roof. How can he just fall asleep like that? Did she imagine the electricity between them when he touched her? Why did

he then act as if she was a bee that had stung him? And it wasn't the only time. At her mother's party, in the closet, there was definitely something there. Or was there? And what was that 'I'll hold you to that' comment all about?

*Damn it Keira, she silently scolded herself. Get a grip!*

## Chapter 19

Deep in a misty valley in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, the drums were speaking. The old shaman sat cross-legged, lost in dreams. He didn't feel the rough hair of the zebra skin underneath his naked buttocks, didn't smell the smoke filling the hut, enveloping his body, and entering his nose.

The young boy who looked after the Dreamer put more leaves on red-hot coals in a fire pit at the centre of the hut.

*"Modjadji... my queen... Modjadji."*

The boy concentrated on the Dreamer intensely. His small black face glistened with sweat from the heat inside the hut. He carefully put another bunch of leaves on the coals and crouched next to the old man.

It was the boy's job to carry messages between the Dreamer and the Rain Queen—to Modjadji. If he missed even one word, his life and that of his family would be worth less than that of a tick on one of their cows.

*"The old one has crossed over,"* the Dreamer whispered. *"The Balobedu ba gaModjadji must prepare... Darkness gathers in the West... We will dream in three days. She is coming."*

His eyes flew open and stared at the boy. "Go!" he screeched and stabbed a gnarled finger in the direction of the door.

The boy scrambled back and ran outside, down the dusty footpath, down the hill to the big dome-shaped, grass-and-mud hut in the centre of their village.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Aum mitraya namah  
Aum ravaye namah  
Aum bhanave namah  
Aum hiranyagarbhaya namah  
Aum marichaye namah  
Aum adityaya namah  
Aum savitre namah  
Aum arkaya namah  
Aum bhaskaraya namah*

The chanting reverberated through the small temple set on a hill above the town of Korak, India. The worshippers were dressed in robes of ruby red and faced east, towards a statue of Surya, the supreme sun deity.

A lone man sat in the Lotus position at the base of the ten-foot tall statue, his robes a deeper red than those of the congregants he faced. His eyes were open but unfocused, as his soul floated on the currents created by the sacred mantra.

A gong sounded outside the temple, signalling the end of the ritual, and the man came back to himself.

"My friends," he addressed the group. "We have preparations to make. She comes in three days."

\*\*\*\*\*

The pyramid shaped temple of Kukulkan was shrouded in darkness. The midnight moon had risen over Chichen Itza, Mexico, and with it came the rustling sound of thousands of feathers. Dark shapes emerged from the trees which surrounded the pyramid. Arms were covered in brightly coloured feathers, packed tightly together to resemble wings. Heads were covered in elaborate dragon masks.

At the centre of the circle, a man covered in white feathers and a golden mask on his head, turned around and around in a self-induced trance.

*Kukulkan... Kukulkan... Kukulkan...*

The chant ebbed and swelled, creating a vortex of power swirling through the group.

*Three days... she comes in three days.*

*Kukulkan... Kukulkan...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Not far from where Keira and Marco slept, an old woman brushed the silky mane of a white horse. She whispered words of instruction to the big animal. His ears turned in her direction and intelligent brown eyes regarded her with attention. His front hoof pawed the ground impatiently. He was ready to leave, ready to do what she'd asked.

## Chapter 20

*Keira ran. Mist covered the ground, she couldn't see where she was going. Taunting laughter echoed all around her and she knew—just knew—if she ran faster she'd reach Victoria and everything would be all right. But it wasn't and she slipped, sliding down a never-ending embankment. Branches scratched her arms and whipped against her face. She heard the rustle of feathers and jerked her head up... a feathered snake came gliding through the trees... flying... chasing her... she was surrounded by a ring of fire and there was no escape. No way out. Steel bands clamped around her body.*

"Wake up! Keira, wake up!"

She opened her eyes and looked up into Marco's face. He lay on his side next to her, one arm across her body, trying to shake her awake.

"Oh!" She gasped and flung her arms around his neck, holding on tightly.

"You were dreaming," his voice was gentle. "Sounded like a bad one."

"Yes," she said. "Something was chasing me—I couldn't get away."

"Keira," Marco's voice tightened and he tried to loosen her arms from around his neck, but she held on, her face pressed into his neck, still lost in the fear of the dream.

The heat between them penetrated her mind. She lifted her head away from his shoulder and looked up into his clear, sky-blue eyes. She saw a sudden surrender there and he bent his head forward, slowly, meeting her lips with his own. The kiss lingered.

Keira was lost in the force of the emotions raging through her body. Her hands caressed his back, moving in a slow, sensual rhythm; they slipped underneath his shirt and she traced his rippling muscles with her fingernails. Her breath quickened and Marco groaned softly as her fingers followed the leather belt around his waist to the front, where the silver buckle rested against his flat stomach.

He reached down, grabbed her hands in one of his and stretched her arms out over her head, pinning her down with one of his long legs.

"My turn," he growled, and bent his head down to the pulse throbbing in her neck. His tongue left a burning trail down her collarbone and stopped at the v-neck of her shirt. He let go of her hands and she grabbed the back of his head.

Keira arched her back to get even closer to his body which hovered over hers. His mouth was back on hers and she surrendered, giving everything of herself, of the deep emotion building in her core.

Then, he was gone.

The tent flap hung open, a cool breeze skimmed over Keira's flushed skin. She lay dazed, not understanding. She took a few deep breaths, then sat up and hugged her knees. It was quiet outside the tent when she finally crawled out. Marco was nowhere in sight. She turned around slowly and scanned the trees which were just visible in the early dawn haze.

Nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Marco gasped as the ice-cold water enveloped his naked body. He had found the stream near their camping spot the previous day and ran there in a blur of motion a few moments ago. He swore savagely at himself.

"Stupid, stupid!"



He closed his eyes and tried to erase the vision of her from his mind, the taste her in his mouth and the heat of her body arching into his.

After a long while, he emerged from the water near where his clothes lay discarded on a flat rock. He dried himself with his shirt and got dressed. Marco sat down on the rock and sighed. "Victoria warned you," he said to himself.

It was after the party at Keira's parents' house. He had a meeting with Victoria to discuss security arrangements for the upcoming Council meeting. He should have known her sharp eyes would miss nothing.

*"You seem affected by Keira," Victoria said out of the blue.*

*"You are imagining things," Marco frowned.*

*"I never imagine things," she said, her tone sharp. "Do not make the mistake of becoming involved with her!"*

*"Victoria, I have no idea what you are talking about. But that is beside the point. Who I choose to get involved with, or not, is none of your concern," he said, glowering at the old woman.*

*"It is very much my concern," she snapped. "The next High Priestess of the Guardians cannot get distracted by a romantic dalliance; especially not with the Commander of the Draaken!"*

*His voice softened. "I understand your fears, but this is nothing like your relationship with Roberto. You were the High Priestess, he was the Commander..."*

*"You understand nothing," Victoria stopped him. "Even after all these years I cannot forget that I did not do my duty; did not fulfil my responsibility to keep him safe."*

*Marco had never seen her so upset. "Victoria, it is not the duty of the High Priestess to keep the Commander of the Draaken alive. Besides, as powerful as you are, it is impossible for even you to be in two places at once. Roberto went into that battle as prepared as he could be."*

*She cut their conversation short with a dismissive wave. "Enough of this. You will keep your distance from Keira. That is an order."*

Marco's mind was troubled as he slowly walked back through the trees to the tent. Victoria and Roberto's story was a lesson to all of the Guardians. They were the first High Priestess and Commander to become romantically involved and look where that got them: Roberto dead and Victoria so grief stricken that she lost most of her powers. She stepped down as High Priestess and it was only after months of pleading from a leaderless Council, and with the utmost reluctance, that she agreed to being its Chairperson.

Marco knew that Victoria had wanted Keira to become the next High Priestess and that he, as Commander of the Draaken, would join her and continue the centuries old tradition of two people leading the Guardians. Victoria always said that her position was temporary; she was merely a substitute, until the next High Priestess was found.

Well, if Victoria was to be believed, their High Priestess had been found. It was his duty to protect her, even against himself.

At the edge of the clearing he paused and watched unobserved, while Keira threw items into her backpack. The tent lay in a tangled heap, his gear kicked to one side.

She froze for a moment when she heard his footsteps approaching, then slowly straightened up and turned to look at him.

"Keira..."

"I didn't know how to fold the tent." Cool green eyes met his.

"Keira," he tried again.

"What!" Her attitude clearly broadcast that if she could impale him with a spear where he stood, she would.

"I have to apologise. My behaviour—I regret that I—"

"Oh stop it!" she cried. "Nothing happened, okay! Forget it. Let's just get out of here." She jerked the still open bag

onto her back, spilling the unfastened sleeping bag out onto the ground.

"Bloody hell!" she swore.

"Let me help," he offered and was at her side in a few long strides. He quickly folded the tent with practiced movements and packed the rest of their belongings in the backpacks while she stood to one side, arms folded.

Marco zipped the last compartment closed, when Keira gasped in alarm. He was instantly in front of her, crouched in a defensive position. The trees on the other side of the clearing shivered and the leaves rustled.

Two magnificent horses stepped out from among the trees. One was so white it seemed to shimmer in its own glowing halo; the other was blacker than the sky at midnight of a new moon. Both stood with their heads lifted proudly and their ears erect. Then they walked to where Marco and Keira stood in the clearing.

The horses stopped a few feet away and regarded them calmly. They snorted softly and tossed their heads, as if inviting the humans closer.

Keira smiled and stretched out both hands. The white horse nudged her hand up and she placed it between his soft brown eyes. She felt the connection instantly, seeing flashes of Marco and herself being taken to a wooden cottage on a hill.

She lifted her hand from the horse's head and turned to Marco, who was stroking the black horse's neck.

"They want us to go with them," she said. "They will take us to where we have to be."

"Good," Marco answered. "I suppose you know how to ride?"

"Yes," Keira answered shortly. Riding had always been another means of escape during her childhood. But she was not about to tell him that.

"After you, m'lady." Marco mock bowed, grabbed Keira around her waist and threw her onto the white horse's back

before she could protest.

He handed up her backpack and she slung it over her shoulders. Then he twisted his fingers into the black horse's long mane and leapt up, settling comfortably as if he'd been born to ride bareback.

Keira looked around, concerned that her feathered friend would be left behind. "Nagwa!" she called. A distant caw answered her as the raven circled above them.

The horses set off at a slow canter. It was as if the trees gave way before them and their branches bent back of their own accord, creating paths the humans hadn't even noticed. Keira was just grateful she didn't have to talk to Marco. She had dreaded the thought of walking through the woods with him for another day; now, they were too busy concentrating on staying seated when the horses jumped over obstacles in the path.

She relished riding again and her muscles quickly settled into the rhythm of the horse's stride. After a while, she relaxed more and took the time to look around.

This part of the forest seemed different—older. The trees had thickened and had long ropes of moss hanging from their branches, giving them the look of old men with green beards. Ferns grew all along the path, dwarfing the horses and riders as they passed by.

A soft mist rose from the ground and enveloped the horses' legs. Even though they couldn't possibly see the path in front of them, the big animals continued forward with confidence, the sound of their hooves on the ground muted.

Keira glanced back over her shoulder at Marco. He grinned and she quickly looked forward again, annoyed at the way her treacherous body reacted to his smile. She felt so stupid for the way she clung to him after the nightmare. And then the way they kissed...her hands on his body....

He said he regrets it. It must mean he thinks it was a mistake.

She was caught up in her thoughts and didn't notice the tendrils of mist creeping up her legs and around her waist, slowly surrounding her in a fuzzy white blanket. Keira yawned; it was as if her eyes were being dragged down by tiny, leaden weights attached to the tips of her eyelashes. Her head nodded and sank down until her chin touched her chest.

*I'll just rest for a moment,* she thought and bent forward, her head resting on the horse's neck. He snorted softly in reassurance, and the last thing Keira remembered was the feeling of her body swaying hypnotically to the rhythm of the big animal's movements.

## Chapter 21

Keira opened her eyes to sunshine streaming through a big open window. A slight breeze stirred white cotton curtains decorated with small blue flowers embroidered along their hem. She stretched and breathed deeply, inhaling fresh, crisp air and feeling more rested than she had for weeks. A smile tweaked at the corner of her mouth as her eyes drifted closed again and she snuggled deeper under the quilt.

*Wait... quilt? Bed? Where the hell am I?*

She bolted upright, standing on the bed with her legs against its headboard and her back to the wall. A quick glance revealed a small bedroom with round, honey coloured log walls, an oak dresser in the corner and her clothes draped over a floral, wingback chair.

*Clothes...* Keira glanced down. *Who dressed me in this nightgown?*

The murmur of voices came from beyond the bedroom's half-open door, followed by the tantalising aroma of freshly baked bread.

Keira stepped down from the bed, grabbed her clothes and quickly got dressed. Her boots had been cleaned of the mud accumulated from their long walk; she put them on too.

She peeked around the doorframe: a passage led in the direction of the voices. A floorboard creaked under her tentative step and Keira froze. It took a few moments before her heart resumed its regular rhythm and she could take the next step. She passed three doors that led to more bedrooms. Keira glanced in and saw rooms decorated like

the one she had woken up in, colourful pillows and bedspreads, woven rugs on the floors.

*Is this how Goldilocks felt?* The setting seemed unreal; too bright and cheerful and in complete contrast to the past couple of days.

The passage ended in an arched doorway leading into a dining room. Fractured, rainbow-coloured sunbeams danced from several crystal chimes hanging from the ceiling.

Marco sat at a round table, tucking into a plate overflowing with bread rolls, scones and fruit; a steaming mug of coffee sat off to one side. He saw her in the doorway and stood politely.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," a cheerful voice greeted her.

"Hi...um...morning," Keira replied.

The woman walking towards her had mischievous blue eyes twinkling from an ageless face. Short, spiky hair shone silver and a wide mouth smiled in genuine warmth. "Welcome home," the woman said and enveloped Keira in a big hug, holding her tight to her soft bosom.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" Keira asked.

"My name is Cassandra," the woman replied. "Come, have breakfast." She steered Keira to the table and put a heaping plate of food in front of her.

Keira opened her mouth, but Cassandra interrupted, "Eat first, questions later," she said and walked to a door through which floated more heavenly smells. "Getting more coffee," she called over her shoulder.

Keira took a bite of a warm roll and was suddenly ravenous. Marco had sat down again and was throwing glances her way when he thought she wouldn't notice. Keira kept her head down and devoured the food in front of her. Cassandra reappeared and put a full pot of coffee on the table. She sat down and slowly sipped at her own mug while Keira and Marco ate in silence. When she couldn't possibly

fit another morsel into her stomach, Keira sat back and sighed with content.

Marco also pushed his empty plate back and groaned. "Thank you Cassandra. That was exactly what we needed," he said.

"You are most welcome," she replied. "All right, *now* you can ask," Cassandra said with a grin.

But Keira was at a loss for words. The millions of questions had evaporated out of her head, leaving only a confused jumble of thoughts.

"Where are we and why can't I remember the journey?" Marco jumped in.

Keira realised she couldn't remember either. She was riding on the white horse, felt so tired—wanted to rest for a bit—then woke up in the bed a few minutes ago.

"You are at my home," Cassandra replied. "We are in the same forest you were travelling through—just a slightly different dimension, that's all."

"Can Daemon follow us here?" Marco asked.

"No, he can't see this place."

"So, the legends are true," Marco said as if he still couldn't quite believe it.

"Yes," Cassandra smiled. "You are at the centre of all things, the place where the lines converge."

Keira looked from one to the other as if she was watching a tennis match. "Excuse me," she said. "Can we please get back to the 'different dimension' part?"

"Certainly, you can ask anything, anything at all," Cassandra beamed. "This cabin, and the grounds on which it stands, exist in a dimension slightly to the side of the one you live in. It is here where the magickal lines that crisscross the earth converge. Which is why I am here. I am the Caretaker." Cassandra's face was serious, but her blue eyes still twinkled.

"Oh, okay," Keira said faintly.



"So, you know what's been happening?" Marco asked the old woman.

"Yes, I know. My messengers have been busy the past few weeks." Cassandra reached out and clasped Keira's hand in her own. "I am so sorry about Victoria's death, dear child. She was a truly remarkable woman."

"You knew Aunt Vic?" Keira asked. She wasn't as surprised as she probably should be. Nothing seemed to surprise her anymore.

"Yes, she spent time with me when she was a bit younger than you are now. So did The One before her, and The One before, and so on," Cassandra said and waved her hand vaguely through the air.

"But, you can't possibly be that old!" Keira exclaimed.

"Oh, thank you. You are such a darling child!" Cassandra threw her head back and laughed a big belly laugh.

"Then this is the place she told me about, the place I was supposed to bring Keira," Marco asked.

Cassandra was still chuckling and wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. "Yes young man, this is the place. And a jolly good job you've done of it as well. Well done, both of you!"

Cassandra turned towards Keira again and continued: "In this dimension, time and distance are irrelevant. Both can be bent and shaped, which explains why I am so young and so old at the same time."

"But isn't that exactly what Daemon is trying to do?" Keira asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Ah, I see Victoria was able to give you at least some information," Cassandra replied. "No child, it is not the same. What we do here is limited to this dimension. The Akasha, however, connects everything in the Universe together; it includes all the dimensions, not only yours. If Daemon manages to enter the Akasha and alter time, it would have a ripple effect throughout the Universe, and that would be a *very* bad thing. For *all* of us."

Keira looked over at Marco; he was staring at her with an unreadable expression. He slowly pushed his chair back and stood up.

"Thank you again, Cassandra," he said.

The old woman bowed her head graciously in acknowledgement.

"Keira, I will come and get you when Cassandra lets me know you're ready."

"That won't be necessary Marco. I will take her where she needs to be when the time is right," Cassandra replied calmly.

"What do you mean? You're joking right?" Keira got up as well.

"This is what Victoria wanted, what she said would happen. I can't stay here. You are in good hands and there are things that I have to do...outside...to prepare. The Families are in danger."

Keira wanted to scream, "*Screw the Families!*" but she stayed silent, glaring at him in disbelief. "So, you're leaving," she said. "Fine."

*I don't need you. I'll find my own way back.*

Marco looked at her for a long moment, lifted his hand as if he didn't know whether to shake hers or touch her cheek, then turned and left the room without a word. Keira and Cassandra followed to the cabin's front door and stood on the porch as Marco swung himself onto the back of the black horse waiting for him. He gave a last wave and took off in a flurry of dust kicked up by the horse's hooves. The white horse grazed off to one side and whinnied a greeting as his friend and the man passed by.

Watching Marco disappear into the trees, Keira couldn't believe he was leaving her here. What happened to the whole 'I'll protect you forever', and the 'we have to stay together' spiel?

*Stop it, he doesn't owe you anything. He must be so relieved to be rid of a responsibility he obviously didn't*

want.

Ignoring her treacherous, burning eyes with fierce determination, Keira stared ahead and tried take stock of her surroundings. The cabin was set on a low hill, fronted by a meadow filled with a profusion of yellow buttercups. The winding path along which Marco had disappeared, led down the hill, through the meadow and into the forest. To the left of the house, a small distance down the hill, was a dome shaped hut. A lazy tendril of smoke rose from a hole in its roof.

*Doesn't look much different from Earth—my dimension —oh hell, I'm already thinking this is normal!*

She turned to the old woman and asked, "Now what?"

"Now, we pick herbs," Cassandra answered. She picked up two grass baskets lying on a bench nearby and handed one to Keira.

"Come on!" she said cheerfully. She linked her free arm through Keira's and led her down the stairs and around the house. They rounded a corner and stepped into a wild wonderland of green, flowering shrubs and trees with branches groaning under the weight of fruit ready for picking. Jewel-like hummingbirds fluttered around purple sage bushes and Monarch butterflies flitted between pink milkweed flowers. A pair of sleepy, emerald-green eyes peeked out from under a catnip bush.

"Mmm, let's see," Cassandra held a finger to her lips. "We need some mint...and chamomile for tea... Yes, also some parsley," the old woman muttered as she disappeared among the tall herb bushes. "Keira, please pick some apples. I'll bake us an apple pie for dessert," she called.

Keira looked around and saw an apple tree on the other side of the garden. Its wide trunk was twisted and gnarled; its low-hanging branches leaned on a stone wall as if needing the support. She wandered over to the tree, savouring the smells of the garden and flashes of brilliant colour from the birds and butterflies.

She stood under the tree and picked the luscious red apples that were within reach until her basket was half full. A flutter of wings startled her and she looked up. Nagwa sat on a branch nearby.

“Oh! You’re here.” She smiled and held her arm out for him to settle on. His presence added another question to the list she had for Cassandra. How did Nagwa get here? The raven hopped down and ruffled his feathers, asking to be petted.

The connection was instant when she touched him; *Marco leaning over the horse’s neck, charging through the forest into the mist...*

Keira jerked her hand away. She didn’t want to see, didn’t want to know what Marco was doing. It brought back memories she didn’t want to deal with just yet. She was so angry with him, but tried to convince herself that she was relieved to be alone. Besides, being alone will give her time to think. She needed to make sense of things.

“All you have to do is stay calm and this will all work out,” she instructed herself aloud. “I am doing this for my friends and family. They are safer if I stay here for a while. So let’s keep it together and find out what the hell it is I’m supposed to be doing.”

She looked around. Cassandra was nowhere to be seen; she must have gone back inside. Keira felt better after the talking-to she had given herself. She picked up the basket and set off towards the cabin with Nagwa perched on her shoulder, her mouth set in a determined line.

She entered the cabin through the back door and walked into the kitchen. Cassandra was already there, covered up to her elbows in white flour.

“Rinse off the apples, will you?” She instructed Keira. “We’ll make the pie later. Oh, and welcome back!” she addressed her last comment to the raven, who had hopped onto a wooden bird perch in the corner of the room.

Keira could only shake her head. "Why am I not surprised?"

Cassandra chuckled. "I have my means and ways," she winked at Keira. "I've known about you since the day you were born, even though Victoria didn't. I had to make sure that the spark within you was nurtured until she could take over, so I sent my old friend here to keep an eye on things."

Keira was silent while she held the apples under the flowing tap. The mention of her aunt's name made her realise how little she knew about the woman.

"Please tell me about Aunt Victoria," Keira asked.

Cassandra sighed. "Where to begin? There are so many stories...so many." She put the bowl of mixed dough to one side and covered it with a cloth. "Come, sit with me," she invited and lowered herself onto a chair at the white scrubbed kitchen table. Keira carried the basket with rinsed apples over to the table and sat down.

"I suppose the best place to start at would be the day when she came into your world," Cassandra smiled. "Victoria was born a long time ago. Did you know that she was much older than anyone suspected, and that her longevity wasn't just due to good genes?"

"Yes, I got the idea—towards the end—when she told me how long she'd been leading the Guardians," Keira said.

"I was there when she was born. I knew that she was coming and there was a threat that she would be killed. Victoria's parents were very active in the magickal world and they had enemies, both within the Guardians and among other magickal groups."

"There are more groups?" Keira asked.

"Quite a few actually," Cassandra nodded. "They all have their own identities, but among the Guardians they are generally known as 'The Others.'"

"And the Guardians work with these groups?"

"Yes. The Guardians are tasked with protecting the Akasha, which affects all dimensions, as you now know. This

duty has given them a unique position. For centuries they have acted as the peacekeepers, or mediators, between the different magickal factions. Some of the factions have been grateful, others not so much. Every time it becomes known that a new High Priestess has been born, or initiated, the unfriendly factions make it their mission to interfere."

Keira felt faint. "And—and she wanted *me* to..." Her voice tapered off. As if Daemon wasn't bad enough, she now had to deal with the knowledge that there were more evil-wannabes out there who would potentially like to see her head on a plate.

"Yes, she wanted you to take over. And I'm sure you'll understand now why she protected you for so long. She didn't want anyone to know about you until she had time to prepare you. But Keira, you have to remember that Marco would stand right beside you, and you'd have the best wing team in the Universe — the Draaken. Not even mentioning myself and the legions of warriors from those magickal factions who support the Guardians' work."

Keira's "Mmm" came out as a squeak. She had to sit back and take a deep breath. The situation was so surreal; she could only shake her head. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Okay, could we get back to Aunt Vic? I understand why she didn't tell me all of this up front, but I can really only deal with one dimension at a time."

Cassandra laughed. "Of course. Like I said, I was there when Victoria was born. The first threat to her life was realised when a wet nurse tried to smother her. Well, I dealt with that situation." Cassandra's voice had a steely edge to it.

"What did you do?" Keira couldn't help but ask.

"Let's just say I sent the woman back to her faction in a few separate packages," Cassandra said and blinked her big, innocent blue eyes.

Keira decided that she wouldn't be asking Cassandra detailed questions about violent topics again. Her stomach

really wasn't up to it.

"Victoria grew up being aware of her powers and how to use them. So unlike you, my dear girl," she gave Keira's hand a sympathetic squeeze. "After a few years, she came here to complete her training and, after that, she was accepted as the next High Priestess. At the same time, Roberto Mansini became Commander of the Draaken. They met and it was love at first sight," Cassandra said.

"I know she'd been married a long time ago, and that her husband was killed. Was it an accident?" Keira asked.

"No, he was murdered. They only had a few years together."

"Oh—poor Aunt Vic," Keira whispered.

"Mmm," Cassandra agreed. "It was after his death that she relinquished her position as High Priestess. She felt responsible—said she should have protected him. Utter nonsense of course, but she wouldn't be reasoned with." Cassandra took the dough from its bowl and started pounding it into submission.

"But, why?" Keira asked, spellbound by the story of her aunt's life.

Cassandra sighed. "It was a dark time for the Guardians. The Du Pré Family—"

"Daemon!" Keira interrupted.

"Yes," Cassandra acknowledged. "They have always been good at stirring things up. This was during the time of Daemon's great-grandfather. He had managed to convince a number of other Families of the 'merits' of his case, which was the need for greater investment in the black arts, ruling the world, etcetera, etcetera."

"Which Daemon is continuing to do now."

"Correct. That is one apple that has fallen right next to the tree. Well, Roberto had accompanied Victoria on a fact finding mission, when they were ambushed. He died protecting her. She never recovered from the shock."

"Was Roberto's murderer ever caught?"

“Oh yes,” Cassandra answered with a grim smile. “It was Daemon’s great-grandfather. He fled, but it became Victoria’s sole mission to track him down and once she did, he didn’t die a pleasant death. That was the last time she used her magick. She said that the need for revenge had consumed her—turned her into something she didn’t recognise. She continued with her responsibilities for a while, but her heart wasn’t in it. At first, the Council didn’t accept her stepping down as High Priestess—it had never been done before—but even they had to agree in the end that it was for the best. So they elected her as Leader of Council and she accepted because she could fulfil her responsibility towards the Guardians without using magick. She could still sense the spark in others though and made it her duty to train the next generations.”

“So, Daemon has taken up his great-grandfather’s mantle,” Keira frowned.

“He’s been trying to regain his family’s ‘honour’, as he sees it. Victoria kept the Du Pré’s in check for a few generations, but Daemon has been very persistent,” Cassandra said.

“So, how exactly do I figure in all of this?” Keira asked.

“Ah, now that be the question.” Cassandra pulled the basket of apples closer and started peeling the red fruit, then handed them to Keira to cut into small pieces.

“In the beginning, the Guardians were not a cohesive whole. In fact, they didn’t have a name for themselves—didn’t know about each other. There were only a few scattered individuals who roamed the earth and tried to survive as best they could. Some were healers, some were weather mages, among others. Many were killed throughout the centuries, especially during the Dark Ages when they were seen as devils or witches. What a horrible, horrible time,” Cassandra sighed and shook her head.

“During the first wave of witch hunts in the thirteenth century, a child named Rayne was born. She was



exceptionally powerful and her parents tried to hide her from the Inquisitors, but they failed. Someone betrayed them. The witch hunters came in the middle of the night and set fire to their house, with Rayne and her parents sleeping inside it. The men laughed as Rayne's mother started screaming. I can still hear that roof collapsing, the heat..." Cassandra paused and stared out of the kitchen window with a terrifying intensity, as if she could hear those screams and see the flames echo back across the centuries.

Keira had her hand clasped over her mouth, her eyes wide at the horror of Cassandra's memories.

The old woman looked back at the scarlet apple in her hand and continued, "I got Rayne out of the fire, but it was too late for her parents. The Church thought they were all dead, but she was here, with me, learning how to channel her energy and use her talents. When she was ready, she travelled the world and searched for people like herself. That small group was the beginning of the Guardians and Rayne was their first High Priestess. Since then, once every few generations, a child is born with the ability to lead and guard the Knowledge."

Keira saw where this was going.

"Cassandra, please—I've never led or guarded anything in my life. That is not *me*, I'm not the leading or guarding type."

Cassandra's sudden laughter pealed through the cabin and stilled Keira into confused silence.

"Oh," she gasped. "I do enjoy these first conversations! It is always the same. 'I can't do it' or 'I'm not strong enough,' always the same! And then they leave here and save the world," Cassandra chortled again.

Keira was slightly peeved at not being taken seriously and sat back with her arms folded.

"Never mind, never mind," Cassandra smiled at the young woman. "Let me continue with my story. You see, Keira, the Guardians have built up vast resources over the

centuries, both in terms of knowledge and money. There are those who seek these resources for their own gain, one of those whom now sits in the castle you so recently fled.”

“But he didn’t kill Victoria just for the money, did he?” Keira asked.

“No, but that is the reason he has given his followers,” Cassandra answered. “They believe he will make them rich and they will rule the world. His true goal is to become ruler of the Universe, and, with the Book of Knowledge, he might succeed.”

“Do you know where it is?” Keira asked again.

“I have an idea where it might be, but it is guarded by spells so powerful that even I can’t trace it. Victoria would have handed down the secret of its location to you, after your initiation.”

“So, does anyone know where it is?” Keira leaned forward. Surely someone had to have an idea.

“No one except the High Priestesses has ever known its exact location. They might have left clues, however, and Daemon has dedicated his life to finding it. I think he followed a trail which led him to believe it is in the castle, which is the main reason he attacked it.”

Cassandra got up to get a pie dish out of the cupboard. “There is one more thing,” she said. “Daemon might be able to find the Book, and once opened, he can use the knowledge for his own gain. But he needs a High Priestess of the Guardians to open it.”

Keira gave a deep sigh. She traced the whorls in the wooden tabletop with her finger, leaving narrow paths in the flour Cassandra had spilled. It was impossible to pretend this didn’t affect her. She didn’t have to be deeply introspective to realise she couldn’t turn her back on this.

“You do have a choice, child,” Cassandra said softly. “I can return you to your home and you can carry on living your life.”

“What happens if I say no?”

“The Guardians will carry on fighting, to the last person standing, if need be. But Daemon will still come after you, since he is convinced you are the key to opening the Book.”

Keira gave a wry smile. “So it doesn’t really make a difference what I choose, does it?”

Cassandra answered, “The difference is that we all stand a much better chance with you, than without you. You also have a better chance of finding the Book before Daemon, because if he does, the balance of Akasha will be destroyed, and all of us along with it.”

Solemn silence enveloped the two women in the kitchen. They sat in a cocoon of suspended time, and it was as if the air itself was holding its breath.

Keira sat up. Strangely, the decision she just came to should have brought the weight of the Universe onto her shoulders, but she only felt immense relief.

“So, this initiation thing—where do I begin?”

Cassandra folded her hands on the table. Old eyes met young ones and a bond was formed at that moment that would transcend time and space.

## Chapter 22

The screaming of a racing Ducati engine ripped through the still, predawn air. Hunched over the powerful machine's handles, a figure in black threw his body from side to side as he manoeuvred through winding roads and around carts pulled by early-rising vendors.

Beautiful colonial buildings flashed unseen past the rider, his attention focused solely on the road ahead. He threw another quick glance over his shoulder. The silver Porsche was gaining.

Marco swung his body through another sharp curve, his eyes narrowed with fury. He barely heard the honking of horns or saw the alarmed drivers' rude gestures as he flew past, struggling to keep the Ducati on the road.

He had arrived at the Salta Airport an hour before, grabbed a taxi and directed the driver through a series of loops and false turns to the warehouse-district. Once there, he got out a block away from his destination and slipped from building to building, careful not to be seen, until he reached the hidden motorcycle. He was so sure he hadn't been followed. But he'd barely turned a corner when the Porsche loomed up in his rear-view mirrors and the life-or-death race began.

The Ducati sped around the road which hugged the central plaza. A few early-morning revellers stumbled along the side-walk and blinked with surprise as dust and pebbles spat in their direction. Curses followed Marco as he raced down the main boulevard. Purple, pink and white bougainvillea streaked past in a continuous blur.

In no time at all they were out of the city and climbing into the low hills surrounding Salta. Marco had to slow down as the road became more uneven and strewn with gravel. This gave the Porsche time to catch up and inch closer to his back wheel.

Suddenly, a huge four-by-four truck stormed in from a side road and slammed into the car's side, sending it spinning out of control and off the road shoulder. It rolled down the hill, coming to rest against a boulder in a heap of twisted metal. Marco brought his motorcycle to a sliding stop and removed his black helmet. The truck stopped behind him. The sudden silence was deafening; there was no movement from the ruined Porsche.

"About time you showed up," Marco said.

"A simple thank you would be appreciated!" Rafael walked over to stand next to his brother and they both looked down on the glint of silver at the bottom of the hill.

"They knew I was coming," Marco said.

"Seems like it," Rafael replied. "I've been waiting here for the past couple of hours; good thing I did. You might not have made it to the house."

The only reply he received from Marco was a long stare.

"Marco," Rafael hesitated. "In the cave you said that you suspected one of our own could be a traitor?"

Marco's eyes were bleak as he looked at his younger brother. "I wish I was wrong, but I'm not. There are too many coincidences. Damn it!" he swore.

Rafael looked closely at his brother and noticed for the first time the dark circles under his eyes, the haggard, drawn look on his face.

"Come," he said, determined to change the subject. "Let's go home, brother."

Marco nodded, put his helmet on and got back on his motorcycle. A few minutes later he followed Rafael through the heavy wrought-iron gates of the Santana family ranch.

The wide gravel road led up to a sprawling, Spanish-style ranch house. White-washed walls contrasted with brown terracotta roof tiles and bright-blue shutters. A broad, shaded patio ran along three sides of the house. The brothers stopped by the steps that led up to the front door and were met by three relieved figures.

Justin jumped up and down and shrieked excitedly when he saw Marco. "You're here, you're here! I knew you'd make it!"

Marco gave a weary grin. "Yes, I made it. Only just—but I'm here."

Chloe hugged Rafael. "Everything all right?"

"Yes. We left Daemon a message at the bottom of the hill." Rafael's smile had no humour in it.

Simone drew nearer, perfectly composed as always. "It is good to see you again," she said and looked around. "Keira is not with you?"

"No, but she is safe," Marco replied.

"But..." Simone tried again and was interrupted by Chloe. "Let's leave it until Marco can tell everyone what happened. Come, you need to rest, eat something," she said to Marco and led them inside.

"How many made it here?" Marco asked Rafael, as they followed the women.

"Adam, Chetan, and Zina are inside, the rest are all either still with their Families, or on their way," Rafael answered. "The network is still up. It took a hit three days ago when the Watchers tried to overload our system, but the defences held, so we've been in contact with everyone—or at least those who still want to be in contact."

"Good. I need a shower, then we'll talk," Marco said. "And Rafael, thanks."

The brothers nodded at each other, then Marco turned and walked to his room.

Thirty minutes later he had showered, dressed in fresh clothes and stood facing the small group waiting for him.

They were only eight in total and had assembled in the hacienda's cool living room, anxious to hear what had happened after they all went their separate ways.

He kept it brief, carefully watching everyone's reactions as he filled them in. "The legends are true. The Wise One exists. She found us the day after we left the cave and brought us to her cabin."

"Wow," Chloe said, her eyes big. "Where is this cabin—why haven't anyone found it before?"

"I don't know," Marco admitted. "I don't even know how we got there. She must have it wrapped in a cloaking spell." He didn't want to get into too much detail about their journey. He still didn't want to believe they had a traitor in their midst, but years of training and witnessing Daemon's slippery antics forced him to err on the side of caution.

"The Wise One said Keira will come back, when she's ready," Marco continued.

Disappointed silence met his news. Adam stood up, towering over everyone else. His short-sleeved t-shirt clung to muscled arms, covered in tattoos. "So, when do we fight?" the big Australian asked.

"Obviously not right now, Adam," Zina smiled at his impatience.

"But what about Keira?" Justin asked in a small voice, his young face filled with concern.

"She is safe where she is," Marco replied, resting his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What if she doesn't come back?" Simone asked quietly, voicing the rest of the group's silent concern.

"She will! She will come back, she will not leave us!" Justin cried out.

"Hush, Justin," Zina whispered and threw a cautionary look at Simone, who merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Let's not get distracted," Marco said. "We have work to do. Adam, what is your family's status?"

"We took care of a few of Daemon's friends who were sniffing around," the big man reported with a grin. "My sisters are on their way, they should be here in two days."

"Good. We will need their special talents. Chetan?" Marco addressed the elegant man sitting on a brown leather chair.

"Two of the four Families of the Northern Territories have gathered in New York," his deep voice rumbled. "They are waiting to hear where we will make our stand before they send reinforcements. The other two are openly aligned with Daemon."

"Bastards!" Adam swore over the discontented mutters which met Chetan's news.

"Chloe, Simone?" Marco interrupted.

Chloe stepped forward. "As you can imagine, the Families in Europe are under severe pressure with Daemon having set up his base in the castle," she said. "They are the frontline and can't spare anyone right now. I'm afraid it's only going to be me and Simone."

Marco nodded. "They are right. They are going to have to bear the brunt of Daemon's disappointment over Keira's escape."

He turned and faced the Healer. "Zina?" he asked.

"I have been able to contact my own family, but no other. They will send who they can. The rest have gone underground. We've been trying to contact them via the network but they're ignoring us, either to save their own asses or because they've joined Daemon. We can't expect any help from them."

"One more thing," she continued, "The Rain Queen sent word: preparations are underway for a Dreaming."

Marco gave a ragged, relieved sigh.

"What does that mean?" Justin asked.

"It means we have a chance—and that we must start our own preparations immediately."



## Chapter 23

Keira sat on the front porch of Cassandra's cabin. One hand was wrapped around a steaming cup of mint tea, the other stroked a midnight-black cat asleep on the bench next to her. Two weeks had passed since she arrived here, or rather, she thought it had. The days had a flowing, dream-like quality that made it difficult to judge time in this place beyond the mist.

Her green eyes were clear and untroubled and her skin golden brown from being outside all the time. Her body was toned and fit from riding the big white horse bareback for hours every day as she tried to explore the forest, but always ended up back at the cabin, as if following an invisible loop without end.

In the evenings, Keira sat at the kitchen table and listened to Cassandra's stories of the Akasha and its Guardians, learning about their past and her future, until it was time to go to bed. There she dreamt of spaces between spaces and of floating among molecules of air. Every morning, in that unguarded moment before being fully awake, Marco's face shimmered in her mind's eye before she ruthlessly pushed it away and locked it in that place she had also hidden memories of Victoria and her friends. She didn't need the distraction.

Her training started the morning after Marco left. Cassandra called her outside to the meadow. There the older woman instructed Keira to pick a yellow buttercup, without using her hands.

There were days when Keira thought the flowers would turn blue from her frustrated swearing, and other days when

her intense concentration caused headaches the size of boulders. There were times when she felt like throwing a full-blown, adult-sized temper tantrum; then Cassandra calmly told her, "Start over. You can't always rely on anger to raise your power. You have to learn control. Do it again."

So Keira started over and did it again, until the day that a flower's stem wavered and slowly bent forward. It didn't break, but Keira's smile was a mile wide as she jumped up and down and hugged Cassandra in exhilaration.

A few days later, she deposited an armful of golden buttercups in Cassandra's kitchen. "Good," the old woman said. "Let's see what you can do with lightning."

And so her training continued, until Keira learned to focus her power and bend the Akasha to create force fields as small—or large—as she wished.

Today she was amusing herself by causing a little whirlwind to chase scattered leaves down the dirt path when Cassandra walked out onto the porch and sat next to her.

"Planning on going for a ride?" Cassandra asked with a glance at Keira's black breeches and knee-high riding boots.

"Yes, it's become an early-morning ritual," Keira said with a smile. "I hadn't realised how much I missed riding."

The women sat in companionable silence for a while, until Keira asked, "So, when are you going to tell me?" She had gotten to know the older woman well enough to realise that something was on Cassandra's mind.

"Mmm, already much too perceptive for your own good. I have taught you well," Cassandra teased.

Keira took a sip of her tea. "I assume it's got something to do with that hut over there," and she nodded her head to the small, grass structure at the edge of the forest.

"What made you think that?" Cassandra asked, her eyes half veiled.

"Well, there is the fact that we've been everywhere but there, and you haven't mentioned it even once since I've been here. I've also tried to go inside, but couldn't find an

opening.” Keira tried to keep her voice casual, but the truth was the little hut filled her with a dread she couldn’t explain.

Cassandra didn’t answer for a few moments. Then she replied, “There are Others who live in the land of man. They are not of the Guardians, they have their own destinies. But they will support the Guardians at crucial times, such as when a new High Priestess is initiated. It is at such a time that they meet and give her what they can. That meeting will take place here, tonight, at your initiation.”

Keira’s full attention was now on Cassandra. It was a testament to how much she had changed, that she wasn’t the least surprised at the news. “Doesn’t the Council have to approve this?” she asked.

“There is no Council. Daemon has killed the last member. You will form a new Council when all of this is done.”

Keira nodded and tried not to be overwhelmed. “One step at a time,” she whispered.

Then, in a firmer voice, she asked Cassandra, “When are these Others arriving and how will they help?”

“They will be here tonight, and they will give you their memories,” Cassandra calmly replied.

“Memories?”

“Yes, memories. A gift beyond value. Three will come and four will share.”

Keira’s eyes widened. It suddenly seemed as if Cassandra’s body was encased in layers upon layers of light, causing a rippling and shimmering effect in the bright morning sunlight.

“Who are you?” Keira whispered.

“I am Cassandra, your Guide. I have taught you what I could, now your journey begins.”

“You are not human.”

“No. Not what you understand as being human. This appearance has been chosen because you would feel

comfortable with it. It is what you needed when you arrived here.”

“And this place?”

“You would not be able to function in my dimension as it is. This place was created for you.” Cassandra’s voice seemed to fill the air surrounding them, flowing down the hill like a gentle yet powerful river until there was nothing but her voice, deep and calm and old as time.

Cassandra stood up and held her hand out to Keira. Her face glowed with inner love and peace and a gentleness that made Keira swallow back the sudden emotion rising up in her throat.

“Come child,” she said. “We have to prepare.”

“I am scared,” Keira said.

The Being in front of her laughed a silver-bells laugh and said, “Darling, you would be quite bonkers if you weren’t.”

Keira gave a relieved smile. Cassandra wasn’t gone after all. She slowly put her hand in Cassandra’s and watched as a dancing, golden light enveloped their fingers, spread up her arm, and covered her body like a light summer dress.

Together, the two women walked down the path to the round hut. As they got closer, Keira saw an opening, covered with strings of colourful beads.

“This wasn’t here before,” she said.

Cassandra only nodded and held the beads back, inviting Keira to enter. She bent down slightly to go through the entrance, into the gloomy interior. Her eyes took a few moments to adjust, but then she saw five blankets placed on the ground, around a central fire pit.

“Come, sit here.” Cassandra beckoned her over to a blanket woven in an intricate pattern of rainbow colours, all blended together so that it seemed to glow, even in the dim light.

Cassandra sat to her right, on a beautiful yellow blanket woven through with threads of gold. Keira silently watched as she busied herself arranging baskets filled with sweet-

smelling herbs on the ground next to her. She recognised rosemary, sage, and the purple-brown flowers of African Ginger.

*Protection, wisdom, and success.*

Next, Cassandra added the purple spotted stem of a herb that made Keira sit forward with concern.

“Cassandra, is that hemlock? You said we should never...”

“Today is an exception,” the old woman interrupted. “It will aid our visitors’ journey through the planes.”

Cassandra glanced at Keira and smiled that impish smile Keira had come to know and love over the past fortnight. “There. We are ready to invite the Others.”

Keira looked over to where the entrance had been, expecting more people to walk in and take a seat on the blankets. She was startled to see that the doorway had disappeared. When she looked back at Cassandra, the fire in front of them had started burning, merrily giving off warmth and making the hut even cosier.

“Cassandra—”

“Shhh,” Cassandra tut-tutted, selecting a handful of herbs from the baskets next to her. She flung them into the fire with a wide arc of her arm, and sat back with a contented sigh.

The hut was soon filled with a sweet aroma, so overpowering that it threatened to send Keira’s head spinning.

“Cassandra?” she asked again, feeling confused and disoriented, her own voice coming as from a great distance away.

“Hold my hand, Keira,” Cassandra replied. From outside herself, Keira watched her arm stretch out of its own accord and their hands link.

*Surya Modjadji Kukulkan*

*Surya Modjadji Kukulkan*

*SuryaModjadjiKukulkan SuryaModjadjiKukulkan*

Cassandra chanted, first soft and low, then her voice became louder with each repetition, until it rolled off the sides of the hut. Keira could almost see the sound waves as they crashed over her head.

*Surya Modjadji Kukulkan*

*Surya Modjadji Kukulkan*

*SuryaModjadjiKukulkan SuryaModjadjiKukulkan*

On and on it went. At one point Keira heard herself chanting the words with Cassandra...over and over...

To Keira's left, the air above the blue blanket shifted. She slowly tipped her head in that direction and concentrated very hard to make her eyes focus on the vague outlines of a shape that turned into a statuesque black woman who settled down next to her. The woman's beauty and regal bearing were overwhelming. Keira was stunned, even through the layer of cotton-wool wrapped around her mind.

"Welcome, Modjadji," Cassandra spoke and graciously inclined her head to the Rain Queen.

Modjadji nodded back and then to Keira. "We are honoured to help the Akasha," her brown eyes were warm and Keira smelled that wonderful fresh scent of grass and earth after a rain storm.

Then the fire crackled demandingly and, as Keira looked into the flames, a figure leapt forth, startling her into dropping Cassandra's hand and scrambling back to the wall of the hut.

"Welcome, Surya," Cassandra said drily.

"A pleasure, as always," a voice crackled back.

The figure took his place on the red blanket, on the other side of the fire. Keira tried to bring him into focus, but failed. His image rippled the way a mirage does. She only registered a sense of immense power and heat pouring from the two fiery eyes fixed on her.

A rustle of wind whirled around the hut, stirring Keira's hair and a small, slight figure alit on the green blanket between Modjadji and Surya. It wore a coat made of a

multitude of emerald, ruby, and gold feathers. The feathers stirred and a yellow serpent stuck its head out, tasting the air with its tongue and disappearing again.

"Welcome, Kukulcan," Cassandra nodded her head toward the feathers.

"Thank you, Wise One," a voice warbled in reply. The figure was an old man, so thin it seemed the wind could carry him away at the slightest sigh.

"Now," Cassandra continued. "Let the Dreaming begin." She beckoned Keira, who was still sitting with her back pressed against the hut's grass wall, forward.

Keira cautiously returned to her rainbow blanket. On either side of her, Cassandra and Modjadji were holding out their hands to her. She put her own in theirs, closing the chain, and was blasted with a power so overwhelming, her head was thrown back and her eyes stared wide open at the roof above her. She was lost in a great, unending space.

The sound of her blood rushing through her veins thundered in Keira's ears while colours swirled in a mad, rushing kaleidoscope in her mind. Then she was racing across the African landscape, Modjadji by her side. She flew over wildebeest and elephants and crossed the air with a fish eagle, all the while seeing face after face in a long line of Rain Queens, their voices mingling into one as they shared with her the memory of water and of life.

Then Keira was surrounded by a multitude of birds of every shape, size, and colour. Their singing and chirping filled her ears until she wanted to clamp her hands to her head; but she couldn't. She was holding on to the neck of the feathered serpent, riding through the sky towards the sun.

She screamed as they flew closer and the sun's brilliance seared through her eyes and into her mind. They dove into the centre of the fireball, but instead of burning, there was only welcome warmth and an understanding of the power of fire and air.

Time slowed down and carried Keira on an entwined ribbon of crimson, cobalt, silver and bronze. She was lulled by its gentle undulations, floating along with it, until a soft voice called her name from very far away.

“Keira...come child, it is time to go,” it murmured.

Loss and sadness filled Keira as she turned towards the voice. She was reluctant to leave this place, but the voice insisted, pulling her away.

“Thank you,” she whispered into the ocean of time and was rewarded with an embrace of shared love wrapping around her like a soft blanket.

As Keira left that place behind, following the voice calling her name, she became aware of a shining figure in the distance. She drifted closer and closer, until she came to a stop before it. Keira could only stare. The female figure was composed entirely of light—warm, golden light that rippled and moved with an internal energy and power. Entire constellations revolved around little suns in and around the Being in front of her.

“Oh—Cassandra...” Keira’s voice broke with emotion at the beauty in front of her.

“You have done well child.” The words resonated through Keira’s mind. A hand brushed her cheek and then there was a slight weight as the Being clasped something around her neck. She looked down and saw a brilliant, oval crystal hanging on her breast.

“Cassandra...what will I do without you?”

“Dear child, you will find your own wisdom. Go and live your destiny.”

The white horse appeared and gave her a soft, greeting nicker. A great tiredness swept through Keira and she struggled to keep her eyes open. She felt herself being lifted and she twisted her fingers automatically in the horse’s silky mane.

Once again, like that first trip she took on his back, she leaned forward onto his neck. He moved forward, and she



barely felt the gentle rocking as she drifted off into unconsciousness.

## Chapter 24

Dusk settled over the Argentine highlands in shades of rose and tangerine. Sharp mountain peaks and dramatic cliffs, glaringly bright during the day, softened and lost their harshness.

Justin usually loved this twilight time. He would go outside every evening to enjoy those few moments before darkness fell over the Santana ranch. Yet today, even Mother Nature's spectacular show failed to lighten his mood.

With his scuffed, dust-caked shoes, he kicked at a pebble in the red sand and swore under his breath, careful not to say the word too loud. Uncle Marco didn't take kindly to children swearing.

Two months had passed since Marco returned to the ranch and Justin was worried. Not a word had come from Keira. Zina said there had been a Dreaming, but that was all they knew. Even though the Old Woman had told his uncle to wait, Justin was afraid that Marco was at the point where he'd go back to Europe to look for her.

Justin didn't know exactly what a Dreaming was, but judging by the adults' jittery tension, he was glad he wasn't a part of it. It made him worry more for his friend, Keira. She was kind to him and Amber at the castle.

A treacherous tear found its way over the boy's cheek and he angrily wiped it away. He was *not* going to cry, even when scenes of the battle at the castle haunted his sleep every single night. Even when he couldn't stop worrying about Amber, trapped by that—that evil... Justin tried to think of a word that wouldn't violate Marco's no-swearing

rule, and failed. He vowed that he would kill Daemon himself, if Marco didn't do it first.

Marco and the others tried to hide their tension from him, but he picked up enough from the whispered conversations to realise that the Guardians were in a bad position. More people had arrived at the ranch and they tried to stay busy with training and strategizing, but everyone was on edge. Some people wanted to go and storm the castle, while others urged caution.

Marco had his hands full managing the situation and had no time to spend with Justin. The young boy felt neglected and tried hard not to show it. There were times when he missed his parents so much it was like an ache in the pit of his stomach, but he didn't want Marco and Rafael to see when he got upset, so he spent a lot of time outside, or with the horses. Zina continued his Healer training when she could, but the lessons were random and haphazard as she also had her hands full; some of the new arrivals were injured in fights with Daemon's Watchers as they struggled to reach the ranch and needed Zina's care. There were thirty-three people at the ranch now, and only eight of them were Draaken.

The ten year old boy believed he was more than capable of being initiated as a fully-fledged Guardian, but the adults always urged patience.

"Patience!" Justin kicked at another pebble in the sand.

A gentle nudge from behind nearly pushed him over onto his knees. He whirled around and let out a small cry of surprise as he stared up into the eyes of a big white horse. The horse snorted softly and nodded his head up and down as if laughing at the boy.

It was the person on the horse's back however, who did laugh softly.

"Hallo, Justin."

"Keira—" he could only whisper and continue to stare as she lightly jumped down off the horse's back.

“Well? Aren’t you going to say hallo?” she asked with a smile and held her arms open. Justin stumbled forward and hung onto her with all his might. He squeezed his eyes shut and wished fervently that this wasn’t a dream.

“This is—amazing!” He let go, stood back, and gaped at her. “I was just thinking about you, how I missed you, wishing you were here and—and here you are!” Justin threw his head back and let out a loud whoop, punching his fist in the air. “This is freaking amazing! You’re back!”

“I wasn’t gone *that* long, only two weeks,” Keira laughed again.

“What do you mean ‘two weeks?’ It’s been two months!”

“Oh! Well—you’ll have to fill me in on everything that’s happened. But first, where are we?” she asked and looked around with a puzzled frown.

“We’re at Marco’s ranch. In Argentina! How could you not know that, how did you get here?” The questions tumbled out of Justin’s mouth in a torrent. “Marco and everyone are in the house. They’ll be so happy to see you! Come, let’s go tell them!”

Keira stopped him with a quick “Shh,” stopping him in his tracks.

“Please, Justin. Wait a minute. First tell me who is here and what has been happening.”

“Well,” the boy said, suddenly serious. “Things have been a bit tense around here. Nobody knew where you were or when you’d be back. They’ve been trying to decide what to do, but everyone has their own ideas. Marco is really losing his patience, and they are not telling me anything!”

Keira lay a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “Who are *they*, Justin?” she asked.

“There is Marco, Rafael and Chloe. And Zina and her fiancé Kamau. Well, he calls himself her fiancé but she doesn’t seem so sure about it and he can do this really cool thing with the rain....” And Justin rambled on about rain

clouds and water until Keira had to stop him again and remind him of her question.

"Then there's Adam, but you know him from the cave. Man but he is strong! And his two sisters..." Here Justin stopped and cleared his throat. A slight blush tinged his ears and Keira raised her eyebrows.

"Well," he continued hastily. "Simone is also here and Chetan. He's super cool. You met him at the castle, didn't you? Keira, he's a firewalker! He's already taught me so much. And you know Mr Harigaya from Japan, but I don't know what he does 'cause he says he's only here to observe. What does that mean Keira?"

Justin didn't wait for an answer and continued talking. "And there are a lot of other people here who needed a place to hide, but not all of them can fight, and Rafael has tried to teach them but it's not really working. And everyone thinks I'm too young to know what's going on, but I'm not stupid!" and he kicked at another pebble in the sand.

"You are definitely not stupid Justin. Maybe they just want to protect you," Keira tried to soothe his hurt feelings.

"Yeah, well, they can go protect themselves. I can take care of myself!" Justin grumbled.

"Okay, so why don't you tell me what they've been discussing?" Keira asked.

"Daemon sent a message that the Council members are all dead, he murdered them all. The Draaken wanted to leave immediately and go get Daemon, but Marco said that's exactly what he wants and it would be a trap and that we would fight him on our terms. So everyone's been training and trying to prepare. Oh Keira! I'm so happy you are here! Marco wanted to leave and go get you and Simone said he must stay here and Adam wants to fight Daemon by himself and Chloe hasn't been able to See anything since the cave. It sucks! At least Amber's dad got word to us that they're safe, but they're being held in the castle and are forced to

cook and clean,” and Justin threw his arms around Keira once again.

She stood silently, trying to take in all the information. So many new developments to be considered, weighed, and acted upon. Did this change the course she knew she had to take?

No, she decided. It didn't.

“Justin!” a concerned voice called from the house's open back door.

“Over here!” Justin called back and tugged at Keira's hand. “Come inside, everyone will be so happy you're here.”

Keira let herself be led to the house, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the horse was following. She dragged her feet, wishing her heart would not beat quite so loudly in the quiet of the early evening.

Justin stopped in front of Marco. “Look who is here! Keira came! I don't know how, but she's got this big horse, wow he's beautiful—can I ride him Keira?” and they let the boy babble on while they stood in silence and just looked at each other.

After a long moment, Marco tore his eyes away from her and asked the boy, “Justin, please take him to the stable. Make sure there's enough water and hay.”

“Okay, sure Marco,” and Justin led the horse away, talking to him all the while.

Marco and Keira were left in the bubble of silence.

“So you...”

“How long have...”

Embarrassed laughter.

“You go first,” Keira smiled.

Marco drank in the sight of her. He noticed her clear, determined eyes and relaxed posture. A short, black riding jacket over a white shirt, black breeches and knee-high boots hugged her body tightly. A clear crystal winked from her throat.

“You are looking well,” he said.

“Thank you. Nothing like a week or so in the country,” she teased.

He laughed softly. It sounded like it was the first real laugh he’d had in a long time.

“How are you?” she asked in return.

A slight shrug of his wide shoulders. “The ranch is shielded but the entrances are being watched all the time, so progress is slow. News is coming through, though: our network is still up, but it’s not looking good.”

She nodded. “Cassandra told me the Council members have been murdered. Who is making decisions for the good of the Akasha?”

“Right now, the Families still out there are just trying to survive. So they are not concerned with the ‘greater good.’ This means we, the Draaken, are making the decisions.” Marco gave a frustrated sigh. “And that has not been easy, as you’ll soon see.”

“Dissent in the ranks?” she asked.

“To put it mildly,” he agreed.

Silence fell over them again, but this time it was companionable, almost comfortable.

Standing so close to him, she noticed the tired circles under his eyes, the drawn corners of his mouth and she wanted to wrap her arms around him and soothe his cares away. *Let me take care of you, now*, she wanted to say. But of course, she didn’t.

The mood was broken when a loud shouting match erupted inside the house. The frown was back between Marco’s eyes.

“Let’s go in,” Keira said and unselfconsciously put her hand in his. This time it was she that led the way as they walked through the door.

Chaos reigned in the big sitting room. A merry fire crackled in the stone fireplace, but that was the only happy sound in the room. People stood face to red face, arms gesturing and veins bulging.

Keira couldn't immediately make out what they were arguing about, but it was serious. Marco wanted to step forward and interrupt, but she held him back. They stood and watched.

Then she said, "What does a girl have to do to get noticed around here?" and her voice carried like silver gossamer strands through the room, leaving stunned silence in its wake.

"Keira!" Adam shouted and rushed over, grabbing her in his arms and swung her around and around. She was quickly surrounded by clamouring voices. Everyone wanted to know where she'd been and what had happened. After a while, her friends had a chance to step closer and welcome her back.

Adam brought his sisters over and introduced them as Jemma and Nikki, both identically blonde and beautiful. "Hiya!" they sang in unison. "We're so happy to meet you!" Keira immediately liked the happy pair.

"So, go on then, tell her what you do!" Adam prodded them.

"We sing!" one of the girls replied—Keira wasn't sure which one it was—and they spontaneously started to sing their own version of "Waltzing Matilda". Keira suddenly felt her foot tapping to the rhythm of their hypnotic harmony.

"That's enough," Marco interrupted firmly. "Next time, give us time to put up our shields," he said to the girls. "They are sirens," he told Keira, as if that explained everything.

Next came Chetan, and he and Keira shared a long look. "You do Surya proud," Keira said softly.

His mouth twitched in surprised emotion. "My life is yours," he rumbled, nodded, and stepped back.

Zina was waiting with a very tall man by her side. His skin was as glowingly dark as her own, but where her eyes were the deep brown of the Zambezi River, his eyes were the soft grey of rain clouds over Kenya's plains.

"Keira, this is Kamau," Zina said.



Keira had to tilt her head back to look up at Kamau.

"A gift from my Queen," he said and opened his palm where a drop of water was transforming into a big, lustrous pearl.

"Please give my thanks and regards to Modjadji," Keira said. "I was honoured to meet her."

Kamau nodded and walked back to a couch with Zina.

"An honour to meet you again," Mr Harigaya said and gave Keira a formal bow. He was dressed in an immaculately tailored gray suit, and as he bowed, Keira caught the glint of silver steel at his waist.

She bowed back, just as formal. "Thank you, Mr Harigaya. It is good to see you again; and I would like to express my hope that our families would have greater cooperation in future."

"Spoken like a true diplomat," he approved and smiled for the first time.

Keira was introduced to a young couple from South Africa, a family from Russia, a mother and son from Egypt, and a group of people from the Santana Family. All of them sought refuge at the ranch when their own homes were attacked or their Families went into hiding.

After the greetings and introductions, everyone settled down on the couches, or on the rugs scattered on the floor, while Keira told them of her time at Cassandra's cabin. She skipped over the finer details, but no one noticed. They were all too curious about the old woman in the woods; excited to learn about the living legend. In turn, Keira was updated on developments within the group, Daemon's takeover of the Guardians' castle and resources, and the individual Families' positions.

A few hours later the fire was only a burnt-out heap of ashes, and during a lull in the conversation, someone asked: "So, what now?"

"We fight!" Adam punched his fist in the air and was loudly supported by his sisters sitting on either side of him.

But other eyes rolled in clear indication that this topic had been worn out already and voices raised again.

Keira lifted her hand; an immediate silence fell as everyone turned expectantly to her.

“Let’s discuss this tomorrow. Right now, I would really like to go to bed.” Keira stood up and the others followed. If they were disappointed, they didn’t show it as they said goodnight and drifted off to their rooms.

Keira and Marco were left, sitting side by side on one of the wide couches. He was lying back, eyes closed, his long legs stretched out in front of him. She sat with her legs drawn up and curled beneath her, watching him.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said, sounding half asleep.

“So am I,” she replied. “But it won’t be for long...”

He sat up and stared at her. She met his blue gaze calmly.

“So. You have a plan,” he stated.

“More of an idea than a plan. But yes, it’s something that needs to be done,” she said.

“Mind filling me in?” She could hear a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

“No, I don’t mind. I actually need you and the Draaken to come with me,” and here she stopped. Cassandra had said that she would not be able to fulfil her task without Marco by her side, but it was still difficult to ask him.

He waited attentively. In a low voice, not wanting to be heard by anyone who might be still up, she continued. “Daemon is hunting two things: me and the Book of Knowledge. There is a danger that he will find the Book soon, and once he does, he needs *me* to open it.”

“Keira,” Marco whispered. “You are in bigger danger than I realised.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “So we have to find the Book before him. If he gets his hands on it, he can enter the Akasha and alter the fabric of time. No one will be able to stand against him, not us, our families—not the most powerful nation in

the world. We would be slaves to his will.” Keira swallowed at the horror of it. Her hatred for Daemon threatened to bubble over the lid she had so carefully placed on her emotions.

Marco looked at her in silence. She could see the thoughts clicking away in his mind, and could only hope that he would understand and support her request.

“What do you need?” he asked, his eyes clear of doubt.

Keira could have cried with relief, but just smiled gratefully. “All I know is that I need to find the Book, and the best place to start looking is inside the castle.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Marco laughed. “We’ll need a distraction,” he continued, sounding relieved at having something to focus on.

Keira smiled. “I don’t know anything about strategies and tactics and...stuff. That’s why I need you. Get me into the castle and I’ll take it from there.”

Marco grinned back at her, “All right, I’ll take care of the *stuff* and you do the rest.”

They sat for a few silent moments longer. But Keira had more questions weighing on her mind.

“Marco,” she started. “My parents and friends, are they okay?”

“Yes,” he immediately replied. “I have guards stationed all around them. Your parents are at the estate and I’ve assigned a team to them. Both your friends, Alison and Sammy, are back at the apartment in London and another team is watching over them. Unfortunately Daemon is keeping an eye on them as well, but he hasn’t made any move towards direct contact. I suspect he is waiting to see if you will try to visit them.”

“What did you tell them—about me being away—and everything?” she asked.

“Only what we agreed on: that Victoria’s death had upset you greatly and you were taking time to deal with it. Simone has been their contact person, since they’ve met her before as Victoria’s assistant. This has pacified your parents,

but your friends are becoming difficult. It might be necessary to call them. We've got a secure line here if you want to speak to them."

"I could do that?" Keira asked, happy at the thought of speaking to Alison and Sammy again.

"Of course. Simone can set it up tomorrow. Keira, there is something you should know before you do," Marco continued.

"Yes?" Keira asked.

"Victoria's will has been read. And she's left everything to you. Her businesses, properties and the castle. The lawyers are clamouring to talk to you."

Keira was stunned. "Well," she gulped. "The lawyers will have to wait. I'm sure there are people managing everything better than I could. But the castle... All the more reason to get that bastard out of there, as soon as possible!"

"Agreed," Marco nodded and stood, holding out his hand to pull her up as well.

"Try to get a few hours' sleep. It will be dawn soon, and we have to start planning. I assume our little 'side trip' into the castle is not for general knowledge?"

"No," Keira said. "I don't know what you are going to tell them, but they can't be a part of this."

"I'll think of something. Now, we're full-house at the moment. But you can use my room, second door to the right, down the passage—"

"But, what about you?" Keira asked, aware that her heart had missed a beat.

"I have work to do. Besides, these couches are very comfortable. Now go!" Marco steered her firmly in the right direction. His voice discouraged any dissent, so Keira meekly followed his directions.

When she closed the bedroom door behind her, she had to lean her back against it as she was enveloped in the male smell of him. His room was dominated by a big four poster bed and, against the far wall, a large, solid red-maple writing

desk strewn with documents and crumpled up papers. A bedside lamp threw an inviting glow across the space and made the browns and reds in the room seem even softer, warmer.

Keira walked over to the bed, slipped out of her clothes and underneath the warm, down cover. One deep sigh later and she was fast asleep, dreaming of lying in a tall, blue-eyed man's arms.

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Thousands of miles away, Alison was also sleeping. She jerked awake when the London apartment's front door was blown inward with an ear-splitting crash. Before she had time to fight, to resist, gloved hands pressed down on her mouth. The sickening smell of chloroform violated her senses and the world disappeared.

Sammy did fight. She kicked and scratched, screamed and swore as they tried to contain her. Her karate kick connected with an attacker's nose before they grabbed her arms and legs and someone smashed the smelly rag in her face.

## Chapter 25

“Keira, wake up,” gentle hands shook her shoulders, lightly at first, then harder. “Wake up!”

Keira groaned and turned around. Eyes, heavy with sleep, peered at Zina standing next to the bed. She closed her eyes again and yawned, then realised she didn’t have any clothes on and grabbed the bed cover to pull it up under her chin.

“Um... Hi, Zina.”

“Keira, you’ve got to come. Now!” Zina’s insistence penetrated Keira’s sluggish mind and she sat up.

“What’s going on?”

“Just—Marco will explain. You have to come. Everyone is waiting in the sitting room. Do you need help getting ready?”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Fine, but please hurry!” and Zina left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Keira jumped out of bed, worried by Zina’s insistence. She hurried to the en-suite bathroom and splashed her face, dragged a comb through her hair and then wondered what the hell she was going to wear. She didn’t bring any clothes from the cabin, and the ones she arrived in smelled like horse.

“Well, I’ll have to see what’s in here,” she muttered and walked to Marco’s cupboard. She grabbed a white, long sleeved shirt and pulled it over her head. The sleeves had to be rolled up and the flaps hung above her knees, but at least it was clean. She dragged on her black, leather pants and boots and left the room.

Only the Draaken members were assembled in the sitting room and their voices stilled as she walked in; then everyone looked to Marco, who stood by the cold fireplace.

"What's going on? Where are the other Guardians?" she asked.

"I only woke the Draaken," Marco said. "Keira, I'm sorry, your friends have been taken. It happened a few hours ago."

"What do you mean? Alison and Sammy? You said they were safe!"

"We are still trying to gather information. But—my men—they were ambushed and killed." Marco clenched and unclenched his fists.

Keira felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. Shock robbed her of her voice.

The silence in the room deepened as those present mourned the loss of yet more friends. Chloe cried softly while Rafael tried to comfort her as best he could. "If only I could See, I could have prevented this!" her voice broke.

"My parents," Keira found the words.

"The watch has been increased tenfold. No one will enter the grounds of their estate. Simone has convinced your father that they need to stay at the house, in case you return, so that is what they are doing," Marco answered Keira's fears.

Just then the phone rang. Marco picked it up, listened for a few moments. Keira watched as his face went white with rage and his eyes dark as the clouds of a summer thunder storm.

"Keira, it is for you," and he held the receiver out to her.

She walked over to where he stood, feeling suddenly cold, knowing who was on the other end of the line.

"Yes?" she said into the phone.

"Good morning, Keira. Lovely morning, isn't it? This is Daemon speaking. We haven't been formally introduced, but I am *really* looking forward to meeting you in person." His voice was smooth and mocking in her ear.

"What do you want?" she hissed.

"Oh dear," he sighed. "So rude! I would watch my manners if I were you, especially since two lovely ladies are on their way to join me here at my humble abode."

Keira wanted to scream and swear at the man on the phone, but her only reply was cold silence.

"Well then," Daemon continued. "Since we are obviously not going to have a friendly chat, I'll tell you what I want. It's very easy, really. You to come here, to the castle, find the Book for me, open it, and then I'll let you and your friends go and we'll all live happily ever after. How does that sound?"

"I have a better idea. Why don't I come over there, get my friends, rip your throat out, and we all live happily ever after?" Keira countered, looking up to see Adam silently laughing and giving her a thumbs-up.

"I'm afraid I can't go along with your suggestion," Daemon's voice was suddenly sibilant and cold. "You have seventy-two hours to present yourself at the castle's front gates. Be even one second late, and you'll find two beautiful heads, gift-wrapped in a box and delivered to your door." The phone clicked off. Keira stared at the black handset in her clenched fingers.

Closing her eyes, Keira strove to find that calmness and peace at the core of herself. She drew on the energy of the Akasha surrounding her, the way Cassandra had taught her, and soon she closed off the hate and rage that threatened to overwhelm her entire being. It would not serve her friends if she lost control; she needed a clear mind for what lay ahead.

To the people standing around her, it seemed as if Keira was enveloped in a layer of shimmering air. They could feel the ripples in the Akasha and everyone felt instantly calmer, more energised and determined. Their own powers stirred inside of them, as if Keira had somehow awakened and strengthened it.

The Draaken stood in a circle around Keira, waiting for her to speak. When she did, it was in a voice so unlike her



own, that she hardly recognised it herself.

“He has Alison and Sammy, they are being taken to the castle. I have to give myself up within three days, or he kills them.”

A low rumble went around the room, fragments of outrage were heard: “Never!” and “We have to stop him!”

“Chloe, please come here,” Keira interrupted.

Chloe walked closer and stood in front of Keira, who held out both of her hands. The Seer took them and an explosion of white light enveloped both women in a blinding flash. Black bands twining around Chloe like strangling vines were suddenly visible; then they began to wither, fall away and turn to dust on the floor.

Keira let go of Chloe’s hands and the light softened and disappeared. “He put a binding curse on you,” she said.

The Seer shook her head as if she had just come out of a long coma. “I feel... I See!” she whispered, overwhelmed by having her gift back.

“Chloe,” Keira was insistent. “I am sorry to have to push you, but we have no time—”

“Keira, I... Whatever I can do, tell me.”

“I need to know which route they are taking with Alison and Sammy. Can you do that?” Keira asked.

“Yes,” Chloe was determined. “I’ll need a few moments.”

Rafael walked forward and took Chloe’s hand. He threw a grateful look at Keira and followed his partner to their room to prepare for the Seeing.

Keira turned back to the group. “As soon as Chloe has given us a location, I plan on intercepting Daemon’s handlers. We have to get Alison and Sammy back before they reach the castle. Any volunteers?”

Everyone stepped forward as one.

Keira was surprised to see the Japanese observer among them. “Mr Harigaya?”

“We cannot condone the involvement of innocents. I am offering the services of my Family,” he replied and bowed

deeply to Keira.

Keira smiled. "The more the merrier, I suppose. Marco, any ideas on how we're going to do this?"

"A few," he acknowledged. "It would depend on whether they have left London yet. I assume Daemon has a private plane ready, so we'll have to take them either before they board, or as they land in Germany. Let's wait for Chloe."

"There is a slight problem," a cool voice said and everyone looked at Simone. "How are we going to get from here, to Europe, in time to save her friends, and meet Daemon's deadline?"

"There's no need to meet his deadline. We're getting the women," Adam frowned at Simone.

Keira held up her hands. "Leave that to me. I'll get us there in time."

Chloe and Rafael returned. The Seer's eyes sparkled and she smiled in triumph. "It was so clear!" she cried. "They are inside a plane at a private airstrip outside of London. There is a hold up with the plane; they haven't taken off yet."

"London it is, then. Marco, you and I will go, and two additional people," Keira said, in full control of the situation.

"Chloe, how many men were at the airstrip?" Marco asked the Seer.

"Three men were holding the women, plus the pilot and co-pilot; also four guards outside the plane's hanger. They looked half asleep, I don't think they are expecting any resistance," Chloe replied, then proceeded to give them a quick layout of the area and few neighbouring buildings.

"Good, we'll have the element of surprise. Adam, Mr Harigaya, you will come with Keira and me," Marco continued.

Loud protestations sounded from the rest of the Draaken, everyone upset at being excluded from the action.

Marco had to raise his voice to be heard above the clamour. "You'll get your chance!" he said. "It is time to end this."

A chorus of "Yeah!" and "Let's do it!" rang around the room.

"High time," Adam said, knocking his fists together.

"We'll get Keira's friends, then make for Magda's Herberg in Germany. We meet there in two days' time. Use the fastest routes possible; Daemon will know we're coming by then. If his handlers try to stop you along the way, you have free rein to get rid of them. But remember, no innocents are to be involved!"

The group's frowns had changed to hard smiles at Marco's words. They were eager, hungry for a fight, and focused now that they had a plan.

"I am going too!" a young voice cried out.

Keira smiled at Justin. "Yes, you are going too," she said.

Zina interrupted. "Keira, shouldn't he rather stay here?" she asked.

"No, he is going," she answered. Then to Justin, "You will go as far as the Herberg. I need you to do an important job for me once we all get there. Is that okay?"

"Yes!" Justin grinned from ear to ear.

"You still haven't answered my question," Simone insisted. "How are you going to get from here, to London, in time to rescue your friends?"

"Horses," Keira answered.

"Excuse me, did you say 'horses'?" Simone asked, incredulous.

"Yes," Keira answered calmly. "Marco and I have both travelled with them before. That is how I got here. I think the other one will have arrived by now. That is why only four can go, two people per horse."

Simone raised an eyebrow, but kept silent.

"Justin," Marco addressed the young boy. "Would you go to the stables and make sure our friends are ready for a journey?"

"Sure!" Justin said and happily ran out of the house.

“Now, everyone get ready, make your preparations. We meet at the Herberg in two days!” Marco instructed.

The group broke up, and after a few moments only Marco, Keira, Adam, and Mr Harigaya were left in the room.

“We have a good idea of the layout of the area, thanks to Chloe. It is isolated, so any fighting shouldn’t attract attention, but be on the watch for innocents anyway. The main objective is to secure the plane and the safety of Keira’s friends. We’ll then use the plane to all travel to Germany. Agreed?” Marco asked.

“Do Alison and Sammy *have* to come with us?” Keira asked.

“Keira, it is for their own safety. We can’t just drop them back at home. Besides, they will have seen what we can do and we’ll need to make sure they understand what is going on. I can’t jeopardise the Guardians’ existence because of two hysterical outsiders,” Marco insisted.

*They are not like that!* Keira thought. But a small worm of fear and doubt twisted in her stomach. Alison and Sammy had been exposed to Keira’s new world in an abrupt and violent way. What would their reaction to her be, once they know what she was? She could only hope that her estimation of her friends was accurate, and that their friendship was as strong as she believed it was.

There was no more opportunity to worry, as people came back into the room, some with backpacks slung over their shoulders and others with small pieces of hand luggage. Everyone was geared for travelling light.

Rafael took charge, handing out keys to cars and motorbikes. “As soon as you leave the ranch, you are no longer protected by the shields. The Watchers will see you leave and either follow, or try to stop you. The nearest airport is Salta’s, but not everyone on the same flight please. If you have to, go to Buenos Aires and then to Hannover. From there, make your way to the Herberg.”

There were nods and murmurs of agreement all around. Keira stood to the side and thought back to their time at the cave, when she had to say goodbye to these same people. Yet now, she felt an even higher level of apprehension and worry. Now she understood what they were up against and she wondered if she would always feel this responsible for her friends' fates.

## Chapter 26

Amber slept on a thin, scratchy woollen blanket, under the big oak kitchen table. It provided scant protection from the cold stone floor, but she didn't complain. At least she got food once in a while, in return for hours and hours of scrubbing floors, polishing pots, and carrying tea to the Master. Her life was pure misery, and the nine-year-old girl didn't understand why. Miss Victoria had always taken care of Amber and her family. They had a nice apartment in the castle and she went to school with some of the local children. Amber's mother used to make wonderful dishes for Miss Victoria and her friends when they came to visit. Her father made sure that the grounds and rose garden always looked pretty. He had even created a special rose especially for Miss Victoria, in that red color that she had liked so much. She called it her 'dragon rose,' and it made Papa so proud.

But then the Master arrived and everything changed. They had tried to escape when the battle happened, but they were caught in the tunnels. As their punishment they have to work in the castle and they are not happy anymore. They are not allowed to go anywhere and the tunnels have been blocked.

She and her family have to sleep in the kitchen now, and her parents walk around with bent backs and sad faces the whole day. Mama had explained that she must be quiet as a mouse. Amber was so sad when she heard that Miss Victoria had died, but she is only allowed to cry very softly, where no one can hear her.

The Master brought his own servants with him and they now stayed in her family's comfy apartment. They didn't really work that much and left all the hard stuff to Amber and her family, like scrubbing the toilets. Amber hated that job, but she had promised Mama to be good and not complain. She missed her friends from the local village, but she wasn't allowed to play with them anymore. Besides, Amber was scared that the Master would hurt them, so she didn't dare slip out of the gate to go and play.

Most of all she missed Justin and the hours they spent running through the woods or playing with the wolves. Amber hoped he had gotten away and that he was with Keira. She was so nice, but needed Justin to look after her and help with her fear of heights.

The darkness in the kitchen started to lift a bit; she could see the outline of the big stove in the corner. It was time to get up and get the Master his tea.

Amber crept out from under the table, tied back her unruly red ringlets and splashed cold water over her face. She smoothed down the old brown dress she had slept in and put on her shoes. Then she filled the big kettle, heaved it onto the stove and switched on the gas. She tiptoed over to where her parents slept in a far corner and softly touched her mother's shoulder. The older woman gave a start, fear in her eyes before she was even completely awake.

"Amber?" she whispered.

"It is okay, Mama," Amber whispered back. "I'm making his tea. But it will be light soon, you have to get up."

"Yes, I'm coming," her mother replied and turned over to shake her husband awake. He coughed that wet cough Amber had come to dread more than anything. She knew it was because he had to sleep on the cold floor, but there was no medicine, and the Master's Healer had said he won't waste his energy on a servant.

Resentment coiled and writhed in Amber's heart, but she had become very good at hiding her true feelings. Her

mother would panic at the first sign of rebellion in her daughter, so Amber pretended to be meek and docile. Yet she never gave up on her belief that Justin would come back with the Draaken and kick the Master's butt out of the castle, and she was determined to do anything she could to help make that happen.

Amber's parents had no powers of their own, however, just one day before her death, Miss Victoria had caught the hint of magick within Amber and had promised the girl to oversee her training. It was the happiest day of Amber's life. Her parents were so proud!

Then—*he* came—and everything fell apart.

The kettle whistled. Amber got the Master's special cup from the cupboard and prepared a tray. Her mother came to stand beside her and gave her a little hug. No words were necessary; they were used to the routine. Amber liked this part of the day best. It would be at least another hour before the Master's servants strolled into the kitchen.

Amber took out a second cup from the cupboard.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked; fear had a tight grip on her voice.

"If this tea makes the Master strong, it will help Daddy too," she insisted and put the teabag, taken from the Master's private stash, in the boiling water.

"No—Amber!" her mother panicked.

But Amber could be stubborn when she wanted and ignored her mother's frantic entreaties. She carried the cup over to where her father still lay on the floor.

"Here Daddy, this will make you feel better," and she carefully handed him the cup.

"Thank you my girl," he said, his voice hoarse from the coughing.

"Drink it all up, Daddy; I'll be back soon," she said and turned to collect the Master's tray.

"Be careful!" her mother said, hand to her throat.

"Yes, Mama."



“And remember, don’t talk to him!”

“Yes, Mama. I know what to do.”

She slowly walked down dimly lit passages that seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of her. Gone were the light and carefree chatter that used to fill the air. Now there were only feelings of dread and the endless silence.

Amber balanced the tray carefully, making sure not to spill even one drop of tea in the saucer, as that would mean she had to go back to the kitchen and start all over. That would make her late in delivering the tea, which would surely incur the Master’s wrath. And *that* she had to avoid at all cost.

Her heartbeat sped up as she got closer to the library. He was always there these days. Miss Victoria would never have left it so messy. He didn’t care where he threw papers and books lay open on the floor. Sometimes he would be pacing up and down, and other times he would be sitting behind a table, intently studying something from a scroll. He never spoke to her.

Amber stopped outside Library’s big double doors. She could hear his voice from the other side; it sounded as if he was reading something out loud. As she slowly set the tray on the floor so she could knock on the door, she caught a few words:

“The gate...” Then loud swearing. “The keeper shall open...”

She knocked timidly and waited.

“Enter!”

Amber opened the door, picked up the tray, and walked inside. She put the tray down on the only table that wasn’t covered in papers and books and turned to get out as quickly as possible.

“Wait!”

Her heart stopped; she froze.

“Yes, sir?” she asked, keeping her gaze on the floor.

“Come here.”

Amber crossed to where Daemon stood by the window. She waited, her hands clenched behind her back.

"You are from the nearby village, right?" Daemon asked.

"Yes, sir," Amber answered.

"Do you speak the local dialect—can you read it?" he snapped, impatient for an answer.

"Yes, sir. I was taught it in school."

"Read this," he pushed a yellowed scroll under her nose.

Amber carefully took the document from him and squinted at the faint, spidery writing.

"I am sorry, sir—it is difficult—" she stuttered in fear.

"Read!" He bent towards the little girl and raised his hand as if wanting to slap her.

"It says, 'Within the Gatekeeper lies the secret to the Book of—I'm sorry, sir. I cannot make out the word.'"

"Could it be, 'the Book of Knowledge?'" he asked, eager and impatient.

"Yes, sir, that is it, 'the Book of Knowledge.' It also says, 'The Gatekeeper will reveal itself only to the Chosen One and only at the edge of the Void.'"

"Yes!" he exulted. "I knew it! Now where was it..the Void...the Void—" and he began manically throwing papers around and sweeping books from tables. "Here!" he shouted and read from another scroll. "'The entrance to the Void lies within the '*Hrad*.' What does that mean?"

"It means 'castle', sir," Amber answered.

"It lies within the castle?" he asked softly, not expecting a response from the girl.

"Yes, sir. That is what it says," she answered.

He glared at her as if seeing her for the first time. "Get out!" he screamed, pointing to the door.

Amber turned and ran, fleeing from the room as fast as her legs could carry her, all the way down the passages to the kitchen and into her mother's arms.

## Chapter 27

Keira stood by the back door, looking out over the ranch. To the North, low-lying hills glinted in shades of ochre and copper in the sharp sunlight. Behind the hills, majestic mountains reached toward the sky in misty blues and greys. Fleecy clouds drifted lazily in the cool air.

She'd borrowed some clothes from Zina and wore a warm parka over a soft, long-sleeved shirt and jeans tucked into her knee-high riding boots. She didn't have any weapons and felt slightly nervous about that. The knowledge that her powers were more than enough to defend herself took some getting used to.

Justin had left the two horses by a water trough next to the back door. Keira walked to them and stroked their velvet noses. "I will call you Yin and Yang," she said. They tossed their heads and whinnied softly, as eager to go as she was.

"Those are good names," someone said behind her. She turned and smiled at Mr Harigaya. He wore a loose, grey shirt and pants and had a katana in its sheath strapped to his back; broad leather straps crisscrossed his chest. Silver throwing stars glinted from the leather. He looked much younger—and more relaxed—out of his usual formal suit.

"I am glad you decided to join us, Mr Harigaya," Keira said.

He acknowledged her thanks with a small bow. "My friends call me Yoshi," he said.

"Thank you, Yoshi," Keira smiled.

"You have a way with animals," he said.

"Yes, I suppose I do," she acknowledged and continued stroking the horses' noses. She sensed that they already

knew where they were going and were looking forward to the trip.

Just then, Marco and Adam came out of the house. Marco didn't have any weapons either—at least none Keira could see—but Adam had a massive hammer slung over his shoulder. She was sure it must have weighed a ton, but he carried it as if it was a plastic toy.

"All set?" Marco asked.

"Yes," Keira replied, her voice calm and steady.

"Let's go over the plan again," Marco said. "We'll emerge in the grove behind the hanger, eliminate obstacles, take over the plane, and leave as quickly and quietly as possible. Any questions?"

"Short and sweet, just the way I like it," Adam grinned.

"Good. One more thing to do before we leave—" Marco turned back towards the house, knelt down and placed both hands in the red dust. He closed his eyes and chanted softly under his breath.

A loud rumble filled the air as a wide crack opened in the ground around the house. White hot flames shot out of the soil and reared up in the air to surround the house. In the distance, the same was happening in front of the wrought-iron gates at the entrance to the estate.

After a few moments Marco stopped chanting and got up, dusting off his knees. "Just an added precaution," he replied to the questioning look Keira gave him. "The ranch is protected by shields, but the flames will serve as an additional incentive to the Watchers to stay away."

"So," Keira said. "You like playing with fire."

"Among other things," Marco smiled and jumped onto Yin's back.

Keira returned his smile and got on the white horse. There was an awkward moment when both Adam and Yoshi headed for her and Yang, but Adam got there first and jumped up behind Keira. Yang didn't even shift his feet when

the heavy man and his weapon got on. Marco held out his hand to Yoshi and swung him up behind him.

Adam held onto Keira a bit tighter than was strictly necessary, but she let it go as the horses moved forward at an almost leisurely pace, setting course for the hills.

"Sure they know where we're going?" Adam asked in Keira's ear.

"Yes, we've done this before," Keira reassured him.

"Just checking," he answered, trying to sound nonchalant.

After a while, the hills slowly came into sharper focus as they neared. The landscape was an awe-inspiring palette of colours. Deep reds, terracotta browns, and white layered the exposed ridges and rocks. Here and there, cacti and low shrubs added shades of green.

Keira took the lead as they started up one of the footpaths snaking up the slope. Soon, they crested a ridge and descended on the other side into a narrow valley. Rows of grape vines lay spread out before them.

"Our vineyards," Marco pointed.

"You make wine, here?" Yoshi asked.

"Yes, we make a respectable Merlot and Tannat," Marco answered.

"That is not something I would have expected in this environment," Yoshi said.

"We can get into the technicalities another time, but this area is actually ideal. We're mainly a cattle ranch—my father started the winery as a hobby, but it's doing well. I'll arrange a tasting, when all of this is done," Marco offered.

"You're on!" Adam said. "I'm more of a beer guy myself, but for free wine, I'll be there."

Keira smiled and shook her head. *He makes wine?* Her dad would keep him busy for hours on that topic alone.

They skirted the vineyard and followed the path into a gully, where it widened into a two-track dirt road and Marco steered Yin to ride next to Keira.

"It's a relief to be out of the sun," she said and nodded to ridges shielding them from the glare.

"In certain areas here it can get up to forty degrees. Celsius, that is," Marco said.

"Wow, that's very different from Britain," Keira said.

*Damn, did I just talk about the weather? How lame!* Keira thought and mentally slapped her forehead.

They rode on in silence and soon Keira's head started nodding as she was lulled by the rhythmic clip-clopping of the horses' hooves on the packed earth. Through her hooded eyes she noticed the familiar tendrils of mist rising from the ground, higher and higher until it obscured the way ahead. Adam's arms loosened around her waist as he too nodded off.

Just as Keira drifted off into that numbing space of utter relaxation, a voice called her name. She dragged her eyes open and tried to focus. Through the swirling fog, she could see the vague outline of the black horse and his two riders to her right, but both Marco and Yoshi's chins were resting on their chests, eyes closed.

*Keira!*

*Yes, yes I'm here...*

*Keira, you are walking into a trap. You have been betrayed!*

*Who... where are you?*

*Keira, there is no time. When you come out of the mist, be prepared... they are waiting for you!*

She groaned and tried to lift her heavy head. Her brain felt as though it had been stuffed with cotton and rags, yet she knew she had to cling to the message. Their lives depended on it.

Up ahead, the mist was clearing, rays of sunlight pierced through the gloom and she could see the green of trees in the distance. She slowly twisted around and tried to wake Adam. She shook his shoulder but there was no reaction. It

was no surprise, her own arms were still too sluggish to respond to the messages her brain screamed at them.

She wondered if she should stop the horses, but it was clear that Adam, Marco, and Yoshi were out cold and would probably stay that way while they were in the mist. What was the alternative? To go back to the ranch and leave Alison and Sammy in Daemon's clutches? She immediately discarded that option, wouldn't even consider it. Her friends needed her, which was all that mattered.

They were in this mess because of Keira, and she would do her damndest to get them out of it.

## Chapter 28

Amber was blow-something-up-if-she-was-a-firewalker mad. Her little body shook with waves of rage. She wanted to cry so badly that she had to bite really hard on the inside of her cheek to forget about wanting to cry. This was a trick that Justin had taught her and it worked, most of the time. Not today though; a few treacherous tears still managed to escape.

The Master's Watchers had come for Mama and Papa early in the morning, before they had even been awake. The men had grabbed her parents and dragged them down the stairs, to the dungeon. They had ignored Amber's frantic crying and her desperate attempts to stop them. She hung onto her father's legs as long as she could, but a vicious kick from one of the Watchers left her dazed on the floor. She crawled back to the kitchen on her hands and knees, and sat shivering in a corner. After what felt like hours, the Master's servants strolled into the kitchen, sneering at her.

"Where are your parents, girl?"

She didn't answer.

"Could it be that the Master has grown tired of their snivelling? You do realise that you will be next?" and they had laughed, slapping each other on the back.

"Noooo, I know," one of them crowed. "Someone finally noticed that the Master's tea was disappearing! And that someone was *me!*"

Amber wanted to explode with hate. *This is all about the tea? My parents are in the dungeon because of his tea?* She wished, more than ever, that her magick manifested as fire



and she could blast these people out of her life. So far, the only thing she could do was be really good at hide-and-seek.

She sat staring at them with big, dagger-flinging eyes. They laughed louder, then shouted at her: "Get out of here, you lazy brat. You've got toilets to clean!"

Amber scampered off, hurrying to get away from the menacing adults. For the first time, she was glad to go. It gave her a few moments alone.

Her father had taught her to never give up, and she had no intention to start doing that now. As she scrubbed, she kept on repeating to herself, *I will get them back; I will get them back; I will get them back.*

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They broke out of the mist and into the middle of a screaming horde of black cloaked figures, all advancing on the horses and their riders. Keira had only a moment to draw on the Akasha.

The horses reared and her three friends were thrown onto the ground, but Keira jumped and landed lightly on her feet, crouched and waiting for the first wave of attackers to reach her.

*Come and get me, you bastards!*

Two men attacked from her right, two from the left, trying to separate Keira from the immobile figures on the ground. But she was ready and threw a bolt of energy that downed two of the assassins. Then, her arms dancing as if she was conducting an invisible orchestra, Keira slowly moved forward, closer to the attackers trying to surround her. Waves of power left her fingertips, rippled like a mirage around the clearing and left crumpled figures in its wake. A wind howled through the trees, bending them down with creaks and groans; low hanging branches swiped from side to side and took even more of the attackers down. But Keira's strength was seeping away. The Akasha was oblivious

to friend or foe and took the same amount of energy from both. She had to step out of the connection soon, or it would embrace her like a long lost lover and never let go.

Just then a silver star came whizzing past her ear and lodged in the throat of an attacker. The ringing of steel sliced through the air as a long sword was drawn and Yoshi ran towards the enemy at full speed, screaming a Japanese battle cry.

Adam was not far behind, swinging his heavy hammer and sending men flying in all directions as he clubbed a path open. Every few paces he would smash the hammer into the ground, sending a ripple through the soil that toppled everyone in front of him.

Marco was a blur of movement as he held four men off through a combination of karate and dirty street fighting, alternating kicks and punches with fire bolts shooting from his hands.

Keira made it to the airplane hangar and sank to the ground, her back to its metal wall. The last of her energy was spent sending a whirlwind to clean up the remaining attackers, flinging them a hundred metres through the air, beyond the trees.

The battle was over as suddenly as it started. The only sound came from the three men's harsh breathing, and then Adam's raucous laughter.

"Run you bastards, run!" he shouted at the departing backs of two cloaks retreating down the runway. "Or do you want me to go get them?" he asked.

"No, let them go," Keira answered. "I want Daemon to know what happened."

"Keira, are you all right?" Marco asked, concerned as he bent over her where she still sat on the ground.

"Yes...Sammy...Alison?" she asked, half dazed and exhausted by the effort of just lifting her head.

"Yoshi went to check. Come," Marco pulled Keira up and put her arm over his shoulder. Together they went into the

hangar and found Yoshi untying Keira's friends where they were bound to chairs against a far wall. A Lear jet stood parked to the side, door hatch open.

"Keira!" Alison cried. She rushed over and threw her arms around Keira. When Sammy also joined in the hug, Keira staggered back and would have fallen if Marco wasn't holding her.

"Are you all right?" she was asked once again, this time by a concerned Sammy.

"Talk on the plane," Marco interrupted brusquely. "We have to go, *now!*" He herded the women onto the jet and into their seats. He closed the door and walked to the cockpit where Adam was already seated, going through the preflight preparations. Yoshi had taken a seat behind the women.

"We don't have clearance for takeoff," he said with a grin.

"Too bad," Marco countered, sitting next to him in the co-pilot's seat.

Adam nodded in reply, pushed the lever forward and taxied out of the hangar. Moments later they were hurtling down the runway and up in to the blue sky, turning towards Germany and their arch enemy.

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Back in the cabin there was silence. Yoshi gazed discreetly out the window at the white clouds. Keira sat frozen, she didn't know where to start, didn't know what her friends were thinking. She stole glances at them, desperately wanting to break the ice, but not knowing where to start.

"Well," Alison began. "We always knew there was something different about you, Keira," she smiled. Sammy nodded her agreement.

Keira smiled hesitantly back at them. "I'm so sorry—"

“Are you kidding?” Sammy cried. “This is the most excitement I’ve had in *ages*! Except for the part where I woke up, tied to a chair—but the rest of it—wow, Keira, you kick ass girl!”

Keira grinned with relief. “I don’t know where to start—how much you know—” she said.

“Quite a lot,” Alison interrupted. “Those idiots who took us talked so much, it gave us a good idea of what was going on. You’re an awesome butt kicking-Wonder Woman and there’s this bad guy who wants to catch you, which is why he caught us, and who wants to rule the world, but you’re part of a secret organization that’s going to stop him. Is that it?”

“That’s it, in a nut shell,” Keira acknowledged.

They are scared of you, did you know?” Sammy said.

Keira merely smiled and leaned forward, taking her friends’ hands in her own. “I am so happy you are safe,” she said.

“Believe me, us too!” Sammy laughed. “But tell us how all of this happened, Keira. We got word that Victoria had died and you were taking time off, but every time we tried to contact you, we got stonewalled. Then we were kidnapped... and here you are. Accompanied by three gorgeous male specimens, I might add!”

There were girlish giggles all around and Yoshi shifted uncomfortably in his seat, still trying to pretend that he couldn’t hear what was being said.

“Hmm,” Alison agreed. “And as happy as I am to be taking an unplanned trip with you, where are we going exactly?”

“All right,” Keira steered the discussion back to serious matters. She continued to fill her friends in on everything that had happened since she and Victoria left London. She left nothing out. Not the trauma of Victoria’s death, nor her travelling to another dimension and being trained and initiated as the next High Priestess of the Guardians. For the

first time, she knew how Victoria must have felt, in that other plane more than two months ago, trying to explain to Keira what it meant to be a Guardian of the Akasha.

"Also, we can't take you back to London right now. We have to go to the Guardians' castle. I have unfinished business with Daemon. But you'll be safe, out of his reach. It's just that we can protect you better this way," Keira said.

There was a stunned silence when she stopped talking.

"Wow," Sammy whispered.

"I'll second that," Alison said, equally overwhelmed. "I mean—we knew things happened around you, but..." She fell silent.

"Nothing like this, right?" Keira asked wryly. "Don't worry, I was just as surprised, to put it mildly. But things have changed. Now I know where I fit in—where I belong—and it feels great."

"That's wonderful, Keira. I am so happy for you," Alison said and gave her friend's hands a squeeze.

"I sure wish I had some of those powers of yours right now," Sammy said wryly.

"Ditto," Alison said.

Marco emerged from the cockpit. "Keira, we have to talk," he said.

"It's okay, Marco. They know everything," Keira replied.

"All right," he said and sat down in a chair facing the women. He beckoned Yoshi closer and Adam also joined them.

"We're on autopilot, we've got thirty minutes till we land," Adam said.

"We were betrayed. Again," Marco said.

Adam swore. "Thought so," he said. "No way they could have been waiting for us, at exactly that spot, without some bastard telling them."

"You're right," Keira confirmed. "When we were in the mist, Cassandra's voice called to me. She told me to be

ready, we're walking into a trap. I tried waking you up, but it didn't work. So when we got to the grove, I was ready."

"Keira," Alison whispered. "You knew you were being led into a trap, yet you still came?"

"Yes, there was no way I was leaving you," Keira answered.

"Wow.... Well, it seems I've been saying *that* a lot recently. But—Wow!" Sammy smiled, her eyes glinting with tears.

Marco nodded his approval. "You certainly took care of them, but it was a close shave nonetheless."

He turned to Yoshi, who was silently following the discussion. "Yoshi, any ideas? You're good at observing and I'm afraid I'm too close to the group to be objective about this." Marco shook his head. "Each member of the Draaken goes through extensive training and background checks, but Rafael and I ran another full check on everyone who survived the battle at the castle, and who was at the ranch in Argentina. Nothing came up. The only thing I can say with certainty is that it is obviously not anyone on this plane. We could all have been killed in that trap."

Yoshi nodded thoughtfully. "Leave this with me. I will find the proof you need."

"I don't mean to rush you Yoshi, but we will be arriving at the Herberg very soon," Keira said.

"At least we don't have to stick to Daemon's schedule anymore. We have your friends," Marco said with a nod to Alison and Sammy. "But the traitor would have told him that we're coming, anyway."

"Yes, so the best would be if you and Marco kept any decisions about the rest of the mission to yourselves," Yoshi said. "Only inform the group, myself included, at the last minute and only give short-term instructions. I'd also advise that the group be split up as much as possible, and each cell be given different orders. In that way, we will isolate the traitor."

“Agreed,” Marco said.

Adam was still grumbling and mumbling curses under his breath as he walked back to the cockpit to ready the plane for landing.

Keira looked out of the window, her thoughts miles away. She was mentally reviewing every member of the Guardians she had met to date. As Marco said, it was so difficult to be objective about it. Everyone had worked together to save her from Daemon’s clutches, and to keep her safe in the aftermath. Now she had to find the one who was only pretending, who was feeding Daemon information about her and her friends. Anger replaced indecision as Keira realised this traitor was also the cause of Victoria’s death, and that of the Council members.

*I will find you, she vowed. Start running.*

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Daemon walked aimlessly through the castle. His tread left no sound on the rich Persian carpets, the air hardly stirred with his passing, as if he was a ghost gliding through the halls. Eventually he reached the Great Hall, walked to a divan covered in red velvet with a gold *fleur-de-lis* pattern and sat down. He ignored the two men standing at attention, waiting to be noticed.

Julius stood to one side, as if not wanting to be part of whatever news they had to report. No one made a sound as Daemon fastidiously smoothed his trousers and pulled at his diamond cufflinks.

A speaker took a reluctant step forward.

Daemon made him wait. Then, in his own time, he acknowledged him: “Yes?”

“Sir, the Chosen One, she was warned of the trap. She was prepared,” the man stuttered.

Daemon’s only reply was a dark stare.

“Sir, the two women were freed. They took the plane and it is believed that they are on their way here.”

“Hmm,” Daemon sounded bored. He crossed his legs and swung a foot up and down, lazily. He lifted a hand and shooed the group out of the room; they almost fell over each other in clear relief to get out of Daemon’s sight.

“Seems as if your little plan didn’t quite work,” Daemon drawled.

“It would have worked if our little *friend* had done her job!” Julius protested and added a belated: “Sir.”

“Oh, she did her job all right. It was your men who failed to execute their part. But, this is no time to play the blame game. It appears that she is on her way here anyway, in *my* plane,” Daemon had to stop and collect himself.

“Why would she come here? She has her friends,” Julius asked, confused.

“That is the question. It seems little Keira has a death wish, because that is the only thing waiting for her here.” Daemon’s voice lowered, leaving an ice-cold trail of revulsion shivering down Julius’s spine.

“Unless, of course...” Daemon’s eyes brightened. “Hmm, she knows it is here, in the castle, and she’s coming to get it!” His manic laughter shivered the stained glass windows.

“Has the scroll revealed more clues about its exact location, Sir?” Julius asked.

“No, only that the Gate and Gatekeeper are here, somewhere.”

“Well, I’ve had the men search every inch of the castle and outbuildings, sir. They haven’t found any gate, or gatekeeper.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. The little dove is flying right into my hands. All we need is patience and we’ll lure her right into my lap and then—ahh—then my dear Julius, I’ll have all the time in the world to do whatever I want.”

Julius let his boss dream in silence for a moment, then he asked, “Why don’t we take them at the airstrip? It would



be easy to set a trap.”

“No! Your buffoons have had their chance. Besides, it is now more important than ever that she be unharmed. I need her to open the Gate. Make sure there is a token resistance when they come, but if anyone harms her, they answer to me!”

“Or course,” Julius murmured and bowed to Daemon.

“Now go!” he dismissed Julius as the cell phone on the glass table next to him rang. He picked it up and purred, “Any news?”

Neither of the men saw the red-headed girl where she hid in the shadows behind an antique display cabinet, clutching the duster in her small hands.

## Chapter 29

The conversation she overheard last night replayed in Amber's mind. She knew which scroll they talked about, it must have been the one she had helped him translate. Whatever the Master—no, she refused to call him that—whatever *he* planned, it had something to do with that scroll. It was obviously important. To her, this meant Keira and the Draaken needed to see it.

But she would have to be very, very careful, very, very patient. She couldn't give them the slightest reason to throw her in the dungeon as well, otherwise there would be no way that she could save her parents.

Amber's chance came earlier than even she could have hoped. That same afternoon, she was sitting in her corner, chewing down some dry bread and trying to stay out of everyone's way, when the new cook and her assistant started whispering over their dinner preparations.

"Hey, did you hear? That group of Guardians that the Master's been hunting, they're coming here!"

"What! Here? But—what about us? There will surely be fighting—I didn't sign up for that! When—"

"I don't know, I only heard that the Watchers are getting ready."

*So that's why everyone is rushing around,* Amber thought. When the Master came, the castle became quiet, dark, and more than a bit scary. But since this morning, the Watchers had been running up and down the halls, slamming doors, and shouting orders at each other. It's been very noisy.

The women's voices sank to low, urgent whispers and Amber strained to hear what they were saying, without appearing to listen.

"If we leave tonight..."

"Are you crazy? If we get caught—he'll skin us alive!"

"I am not staying and fighting! Those Guardians don't take prisoners. Besides, this Keira woman is said to have some serious powers."

"Yes, you're right. Maybe..."

"Maybe nothing. I'm leaving, *tonight*! You can stay, or come with me."

"Fine, but we have to be careful. We'll have to find a way through the wall, we can't just leave out the front gate."

"Leave it to me, I know who is on night watch. Meet me at midnight by the side door leading to the rose garden. And don't be late! I'm leaving with or without you..."

Amber couldn't hear any more, but it didn't matter.

*Keira is coming! But I have to warn her*, she thought. *They know she's coming and there are so many of them here.*

Amber twisted her hands together in agitation. Her friends were walking into a trap and if they all died, who would save her and her parents?

Amber thought for a few moments and then her lips pressed together in a thin, determined line. She had a plan. She would need all her courage, but she only had to think of her parents in the cold dungeon to push her fear aside.

Evening came and the castle quieted down. Amber lay on the woollen blanket under the kitchen table and tried very hard to stay awake. She was so tired; it had been a long day of brutal chores, but every time she felt her eyes drooping, she pinched herself and bit on the inside of her cheek. She made up songs and rhymes in her head and recited the names of the wolf pack a hundred times. She remembered all the happy times she had in the castle, and tried to imagine happier times to come.

The clock against the far wall tick-tocked hypnotically, trying to lull her to sleep. She got up a few times to drink water and splash her face. At last, the clock's hands showed that it was a quarter past eleven.

Amber took a deep, shuddering breath. It was time to go.

She crept down the passage leading from the kitchen to the rest of the castle. Her bare feet didn't make even the slightest whisper on the cold, stone tiles. She had packed her shoes in the only possession she was allowed to keep, a small backpack that also stored one change of clothes.

She knew the way to the dungeon. She had been allowed to go down there just that morning to take her parents some water. But all she could hear was her mother's weeping and her father's coughing, which had gotten worse as soon as he stopped drinking the tea.

From that visit, she knew the rusted gate at the bottom of the stairwell leading to the dungeon wasn't locked. The only prisoners down there were her parents, and *he* obviously didn't think they'd escape. Still, there was the fat old guard who sat at the entrance to the passage leading to the cells.

*I'll cross that bridge when I get there,* Keira thought. There was always the cake cook had baked that afternoon. She'll tell him cook said he could have some. That should get him moving.

She crept down the stone stairs, hugging the wall as she circled around and around, deeper into the castle's nether regions. The guard was fast asleep. She could hear his snores before she could see him. When she took the last step down, she merely peeped quickly at him, just to be sure, before slipping past and quietly running down the dimly lit tunnel, past three other doors, to the one behind which her parents were kept.

"Mama," she whispered. "It's Amber. Papa?"

There was a slight shuffling sound, then her mother's soft voice called from the other side of the door.

"Amber?"

"Yes, Mama. I've come to tell you to hold on. I'm going to get you and Papa out."

"Amber! No! It is too dangerous, please—you have to go!" her father whispered urgently.

"Papa! How are you? Please hold on, I've got a plan," Amber whispered, her little hands vainly pushing at the rough wood. She couldn't even see a keyhole, and even if there was one, where would the key be?

"The Draaken is coming. They will help us!" Amber sobbed against the door, trying to be quiet unless the guard woke up.

"Amber, listen!" her father said, the desperation in his voice made Amber stop her scrambling.

"Amber," he continued. "You have to be brave my girl. You have to get out of the castle."

"Yes Papa. I'm going to find the Draaken. But I have to get the scroll first. Do you remember the one I told you about? I'm going to take it to Keira," Amber answered. "I—I came to tell you—I love you and don't worry."

"No!" Amber's mother cried from within the cell. "It is too dangerous! Go to the village, hide there!"

Keira heard her father moving her mother away from the door and trying to comfort the distraught woman. After a few tense moments he was back and whispered urgent instructions: "You will have to be our big girl, Amber. Get that scroll and leave the castle as quick as you can. You find Keira, and you give it to her. She is our only hope. Please Amber, we love you."

Amber heard her mother's muffled sobs. She felt a desperate keening start in her own throat, but she swallowed and did the cheek biting trick again.

"Yes Papa, I understand," her voice broke. "Please Papa, stay strong, I will be back with the Draaken!" With a last

touch against the door, she turned and crept back along the wet tunnel, past the sleeping guard, and up the circular steps.

She made her way back through the kitchen. This time she took the passage she was so familiar with, the one leading to the library, where *he* had his tea every morning. Inch by inch, she made her way in the darkness, her heart beating a polka in her throat. The way to the library was usually nerve-wrecking in the day with the Watchers appearing unexpectedly from behind corners and statues, but at night... Amber had to clamp down on the whimpers threatening to escape from behind her lips.

*I can do this, I can do this...*

Voices!

Amber quickly hid behind a suit of steel armour standing watch over the long corridor. She could see the library's double doors in the distance.

*Just too far!*

The voices rumbled closer. Three Watchers glided through the shadows, right past Amber where she hunched, curled up in a small ball.

*I am not here, I am not here, I am not here...*

The refrain repeated itself in her mind, over and over until she was completely convinced of the fact that they couldn't see her. She concentrated so hard on *not* being there, that it took her a while to realise she was alone in the corridor once again.

Somewhere in the castle a clock chimed a quarter to the hour. She had to hurry.

Amber tiptoed the last few metres to library. She slowly turned the big brass knob and froze as the door creaked open, the sound rolling down the corridor behind her like a foghorn. After an agonizing moment, she peered around the door. Moonlight streamed in from the tall, narrow windows on the far wall. The room was empty.

Amber slipped through the small opening and clicked the door closed behind her. She inched her way over to where she had last seen *him* reading from the scroll.

It wasn't there!

She looked around frantically. The library was so big, she could search until the sun came up and not find it. Amber lifted books, trying to be as quiet as possible, but still the papers rustled and whispered as she moved them around.

The doors slammed open so quickly, Amber had no time to hide. She stood like a deer, frozen in an oncoming car's headlights. It was a Watcher! He slinked into the room and looked around with a puzzled frown. His stare slid over Amber and continued up and down the bookshelves.

"Mmm, could have sworn I heard something in here," he scratched his head, left, and closed the door behind him.

Amber sank to the floor, her quivering knees unable to bear her any longer.

*He didn't see me... Why didn't he see me?*

She bent over, trying her best not to be sick all over the floor.

A few deep breaths later she lifted her head, weary with the fear and tension bearing down on her small shoulders. She looked up, and there it was. The scroll lay on a low table a few feet away, rolled up and tied with a red velvet ribbon. Amber could only crawl on her hands and knees. She opened it, making sure it was the right one. The ancient text in the spidery writing leapt out at her and she wanted to cry with relief.

New strength flowed through her and she quickly rolled the parchment up, retied the ribbon, and carefully pushed it into her backpack.

Amber would never be able to remember the journey back down the long passages and corridors. It passed in a blur of shadows and light, then suddenly she was hiding behind a big shrub at the edge of the rose garden. She could see the fountain in the distance, its once-white marble

shining dully in the moonlight. It was silent and dry, filled with dead leaves.

*Papa would never have allowed that, she thought.*

A few seconds later, two shadows, weighted down with big bags over their shoulders, slithered past the roses towards the outer wall. They didn't notice the small shimmer of air that followed them. They walked along the wall, until they reached the narrow wooden door where a Watcher stood guard. The clinking of coins sounded as payment passed hands then the door was thrown open. The guard went with the two deserters, down creaking steps that led to the moat. They stepped onto a flat wooden raft and poled themselves over to the opposite bank.

Amber slipped underneath the steps and waited in the dark. The guard returned with the raft, tied it to the pole and went back up the steps, his boots passing inches from Amber's face. She heard him lock the door in the wall and waited for everything to be quiet before she crept onto the raft, untied it, and slowly made her way over the water. The cook and her assistant had already disappeared down the road, but Amber wasn't going that way. She knew who could help her find Keira, and find her quick.

The little girl felt a great weight lift from her shoulders as she flitted through the dark trees.

*I'm getting help! Mama, Papa, I'll be back soon!*

Her feet found the path that she and Justin used to take so often—it seemed a lifetime ago—and she kept on running until she reached the clearing in the woods where the wolf pack lived.

She fell down to her knees on the soft grass, panting from exhaustion, and only looked up when a cold, wet nose snuffled her neck.

"Varg!" she called in relief, and threw her arms around the big wolf's neck. "I am so happy to see you!" She was soon surrounded by the rest of the pack, each wolf coming up to greet and reassure her.



Amber giggled as the young pups fell over each other in their eagerness to reach her, and she spent a few happy moments scratching ears and furry tummies, until reality came crashing back.

She turned to the big male wolf. "Varg, I need your help. I need to find Keira, tonight! Do you know where she is?"

Varg and Ylva looked at each other, and Amber could swear she saw the silent communication between them. Varg stood up and came to stand next to her. He nudged her with his nose and looked at his back.

"You want me to.... Do you really mean it?" Amber asked, incredulously. The wolves had never before allowed her or Justin to ride on their backs, even when they were very small.

"Are you sure? I mean, I'm not little anymore," she asked again.

The wolf looked her up and down with disdain, as if trying to say that he could carry a much heavier load than her slight body.

"Okay," Amber laughed, grabbed a handful of fur and jumped onto Varg's back. She felt his powerful shoulder muscles under her hands. She had scant time to shift her seat as he sprang away. Trees flew past them in a continuous blur of motion. Amber could only bend forward and cling to his fur for dear life as Varg ran on and on.

## Chapter 30

It was their second night as guests at the Herberg and, once again, Keira couldn't sleep.

Their landing at the airstrip the previous evening had been uneventful, except for a token resistance from a handful of Watchers who quickly dispersed when Marco sent a fireball their way.

"Now he'll definitely know we're on our way," Adam had grumbled.

"Good," Keira replied as they all bundled into a big SUV sent by Magda, the Herberg's owner. They'd arrived late, but the friendly proprietress and her husband welcomed them with warm smiles and bowls of steaming *goulash*. Keira learned that Magda was also a Guardian. She had earth magick and was proud of the home-grown ingredients in their dinner. "I show you gardens tomorrow, *ja*?" she beamed.

This morning, after a night of fitful tossing and turning, Keira had finally gotten up only to find Marco and Yoshi already at the breakfast table.

"You look as tired as I feel," she said and helped herself to some fresh bread rolls, cold meat and cheese.

"Hmm," Marco acknowledged and took a sip from what looked like very strong, very black coffee.

"What's the plan for today?" Keira asked and wondered if she could stomach some of that coffee.

"We wait for everyone to arrive. They should all be here by tonight," Marco said.

Alison and Sammy joined them and after their own breakfast, Keira suggested they go for a walk outside. She

felt herself relaxing as her friends laughed and joked and tried, not very subtly, to distract her from what lay ahead.

Sammy regaled them with tales of her holiday romances and Alison blushed when they asked her about unemployed ski instructors. All three girls appreciated the view when they discovered Magda's blond, broad-shouldered son working in her vegetable garden.

The rest of the Draaken had arrived at intervals throughout the day. First came Adam's sisters. They could be heard a mile away as they sang an infectious ditty and everyone's feet started tapping.

"Stop it!" Adam thundered and they complied with laughs and giggles while hugging him from both sides.

Next came Chloe, Rafael, and Justin. Rafael disappeared inside with his brother to discuss strategy, while Chloe joined the girls outside and Justin went off exploring.

When they went in for lunch, Chetan, Zina, and Kamau were already there, talking with Magda's husband.

"Oh, I didn't see you arrive," Keira smiled and greeted her friends.

"We came in a while ago; I had to feed this man first before I came to say hallo," Zina said with a soft glance at her fiancé.

"Keira," Chetan said and nodded a welcome.

She took a seat at the table and soon the conversation was flowing, along with a steady stream of German *weissbeer*, most of which flowed in Adam's direction.

"Is it a prerequisite that every Draaken member has to be drop-dead gorgeous?" Sammy whispered to Keira.

"I hadn't noticed," Keira whispered. "And stop drooling!"

It was early evening and they were gathered in the living room, when Simone strolled in and hooked her arm through Marco's. "Did I miss anything?" she asked.

"No, but now that everyone is here, we can iron out the last details," Marco said and extracted his arm.

They'd planned their approach to the castle late into the night, agreeing that they would leave the Herberg midmorning the next day. Magda's husband, Dieter, would take them across the border, following old loggers' tracks, and into the forest. From the drop-off point, they would hike through the forest and reach the castle just before dusk. Dieter offered to take them right up to the castle's gates, but Marco declined. He wanted to arrive unannounced.

"Early twilight is a good time to attack," Chetan agreed. "The drawbridge and gate face west. The sun will be in their eyes."

It was past midnight when everyone drifted off to bed. Marco walked Keira to her room. "Long day tomorrow," he said. "I hope you get some sleep."

"You too," she said and hesitated in front of her door.

"Goodnight," he nodded and continued walking down the hallway to his own room.

"Goodnight."

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Now, Keira paced up and down in her room. She looked out the window, then paced some more and thought over their plan. Tomorrow they would cross the border and make their way to the castle. They had done what Yoshi had suggested. Marco had divided them into groups of two, and each group had their own orders. Still, they were no closer to finding the traitor and Marco didn't want to take any chances with the mission.

Keira was going stir-crazy. She quickly pulled her boots on, grabbed her jacket, and left the room. She walked out onto the Herberg's wide front porch; it reminded her so much of Cassandra's cabin that she immediately felt calmer. She took a few deep breaths of the crisp mountain air and felt her mind begin to clear.

"Couldn't sleep?" a deep voice asked behind her.

“Oh!” Keira gasped.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” Marco said and stood up from the bench he was sitting on.

“No,” she smiled. “It’s okay. I didn’t expect anyone to be out here. I thought you’d gone to bed?”

“Couldn’t sleep either.” He stood next to her and together they looked up at the sky. There were no other buildings near the Herberg, no outbuildings either, so the stars were visible in all their shining glory. It felt as if they were standing at the centre of the Universe, surrounded by its magnificence.

“It is so beautiful,” Keira whispered, awed by Mother Nature’s display.

“Yes,” he agreed.

His voice hinted at a double meaning. Keira suddenly wanted to ask him what happened that night in the tent, why he left so suddenly. But she didn’t ask. She didn’t want to look like a needy fool.

“Keira,” he said. “I don’t know when we will be alone again, but I have to ask you—what do you plan to do once we reach the castle?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, avoiding the question.

“You haven’t taken part in the discussions today, not once. It is clear you have your own plan. Now the rest of the group has their instructions. Everyone is ready and they are assuming that you and I will join the battle to retake the castle. But we won’t, will we?”

“What do you mean ‘we’? You are joining the Draaken to create a distraction. I will enter the castle alone.”

“No,” he said, quite calm.

“You have to, it is the way it is supposed to be.”

“No,” he said again.

“What do you mean ‘no?’”. You don’t have a choice, I never said you’d come with me.”

“I never said I’d let you go in alone. Besides, I *have* a choice, too, and that choice is to not leave you. I know you

are going after the Book. It is dangerous and it is my mission to protect you," he said.

"Marco, please," she said. "I have to do this and you'll be in the way. Besides, the group needs you to lead them."

"Trying to make me feel guilty won't work," he said, amused at her attempt at convincing him.

"It's not funny! I'm serious," she insisted.

"You're right, this is anything but funny. However, the others can cope without me. I am not so sure that you can."

"Oh really?" she said, quite insulted.

"I didn't mean it like that," he was laughing again.

"Oh, keep quiet," she huffed. "You are not going with me and that is that!"

Silence greeted her statement. She peered at him through the dark; she could only see his silhouette leaning against a post.

"I meant it!" she said again, wanting to make sure he got the message.

He still didn't answer, only walked slowly towards her. Keira gave an uncertain step back into the balustrade behind her.

His dark shape loomed over her as he bent his face towards her.

"I—am—not—leaving you!" he growled.

"You did before... Twice!" The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

*Damn it!*

He sucked in his breath. The silence between them was loaded with her accusation.

When she couldn't stand it anymore, her nerves stretched to breaking point, she stammered "I—I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you are right. I have left you before. It is no wonder you think I would be capable of doing so again. But this is different."

"How?" she asked in a small voice.

“Because, I am sworn to protect you. I gave Victoria my word as Leader of my Family—as Commander of the Draaken. The first time—in the tent—I was endangering you.” He looked almost affronted by her not understanding.

“Oh, that is utter bull-twang!” Keira cried, hands on her hips and eyes flashing. “Please explain how exactly you were ‘endangering’ me?”

Marco made a noise that sounded like something between a curse and a laugh. “By placing my needs first. I was selfish, I wanted you for myself. But we have duties to our Families and to the Akasha. We cannot get distracted,” his voice was low and insistent. “Then, at Cassandra’s cabin, you were safe and protected. I had to get away from you. If I had followed my needs, you would not have been able to concentrate on your training and fulfill your destiny.”

“Well, if that isn’t the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard,” Keira said. “Not only are you seriously overestimating your effect on me, you are also underestimating my powers of concentration!”

Keira felt ridiculous even as the words left her mouth. *He wanted me*, was all she could think. *Stop it, stop it! Stop acting like a love-struck idiot. He may want you, but that is all. He cares more about his duty...*

“You speak about duty—well, I have a duty too,” she found her voice again.

“Yes, and that involves keeping yourself safe!” Marco had his hands around her upper arms.

“Marco...”

The next moment he was kissing her as if his life depended on it. Her eyes were wide open, shocked. He was devastating her mouth, ravishing her lips. Then he wrenched his face away from hers and glared at her.

“What..?” she stammered.

“I am not letting you go again,” he said.

“Okay,” her smile grew of its own volition and she put her arms around his neck. It was her turn to pull him close,

and this time the kiss was softer, a gentle exploration of velvet and satin. She closed her eyes with a sigh.

*This is where I belong*, Keira thought as the world faded away around them.

He lifted her up and seated her on the top of the porch's balustrade. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he stood, holding her firmly against him. His lips left fiery trails down her neck and along her collarbone.

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Amber's eyes streamed with tears from the cold, predawn wind whipping across her face, and her fingers were starting to cramp. "Hurry, we must hurry!" she whispered into Varg's ear through blue-numb lips. The big wolf seemed to understand as he put in an extra burst of energy and they went even faster. Suddenly, they were flying, hanging in the air for an impossible amount of time as Varg cleared a river in one jump and landed lightly on the other side. He ran on, ignoring Amber's sharp gasp of fear.

They crossed one last hill and then Varg came to such a sudden stop that Amber almost flew over his head. She caught herself at the last moment and slid down his flank onto the ground in a frozen heap. The wolf panted from the effort of running for hours on end; then he threw his head back and howled at the sky.

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Marco stood back and smiled at Keira. He lifted his hand and gently rubbed her lips with his thumb.

"You look as if you've been ravished, my dear," he teased softly.

She stroked his cheek in return, feeling the start of a stubble. "I loved being ravished," she whispered.

He groaned and kissed her again, hard.



This time she pushed him away with a laugh. "I would really like for this to go on, but we have to get some sleep."

Marco sighed deeply. "I suppose you're right," and he lifted her off the railing as if she was a feather. As her feet touched the ground, a loud howl erupted in the distance. Marco and Keira froze where they stood.

"Was that...?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, it sounded like Varg. Come on!" Marco said. He grabbed Keira's hand and pulled her down the porch steps into the garden. They quickly left through the wooden gate and followed the trail that led through the surrounding trees, towards a distant ridge. After a short but fast hike, they reached the top of the ridge and stood looking down at the Herberg.

"Where is he?" Keira asked, concerned.

A soft growl guided them a short distance further down the path and they found the wolf, standing over a small lump on the ground.

"Oh," Keira gasped and ran over to Varg. She knelt next to him and turned the shape around.

"It's Amber!"

Marco ripped off his jacket and bundled the girl into it, trying to get some warmth back into her ice-cold body. "He brought her here—why?"

Keira turned to Varg and placed her hand on the wolf's head. She instantly saw the trip he had taken through the woods with the little girl on his back.

"She asked Varg for help to find me," Keira said. "I could feel their urgency. But why?" she asked.

Marco lifted the small girl in his arms. "We have to get her back to the Herberg, where it's warm. Hopefully she'll be able to tell us." He started back down the trail, carefully carrying his precious cargo.

"Thank you," Keira whispered to the big wolf. He gave her hand a last sniff and jumped away, sprinting back through the forest in the direction he came.

Keira followed Marco down the trail and soon they were standing in the Herberg's warm front room. The rest of the group was waiting for them. A fire crackled in the fireplace and Marco put the girl down on a soft couch closest to it. He fetched a thick throw from a nearby chair and bundled her in it. Keira sat down next to her, on the edge of the couch, and stroked the unconscious girl's red hair.

"We heard the howling," Adam said, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Who is that?" Zina asked and stepped forward to examine the girl.

"Amber!" Justin cried when he saw the red hair and ran over to the couch.

Alison and Sammy were standing to one side, not sure what they should do.

"Varg brought her," Marco said to the group in general.

Zina continued her examination, then held both her hands cupped over the girl's head, closed her eyes, and started a soft chant. After a few moments of the hypnotic singing, Amber slowly opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she asked in a small, scared voice.

"It's okay, you are with friends," Keira said with a smile.

"Keira!" the girl cried and threw her arms around Keira's neck, sobbing with relief.

Keira hugged the girl close to her. "There, there," she tried to comfort Amber and couldn't help but feel she was only skin and bones. She pushed down the instinctive rage—one more thing Daemon would answer for—and asked in a soothing voice, "Now, would you like to tell us why you were looking for me? And how you knew where we were?"

"Yes, because if she knew," Rafael ventured, "*others* might know as well.

"It's okay. He only knows you're coming, not where exactly you are. I asked Varg to bring me, and here I am," Amber smiled. "I have something for you," she said to Keira and held her hand out for the small backpack lying next to

the couch. Keira handed it to her and Amber tugged at the opening. She took out a yellow, rolled-up document, tied with a red ribbon and handed it to Keira.

“What is this?” Keira asked with a frown.

Just then Simone stepped forward, carrying a bowl of steaming soup. “Here you go little one, this will warm you up nicely,” and she held the bowl out to the girl.

A sharp ring of steel caught everyone by surprise and Simone stopped in her tracks. A long silver sword pressed against her throat.

“I wouldn’t move if I was you,” Yoshibumi Harigaya said, very calmly. His arm was rock still as it held the glinting blade against Simone’s snow white neck.

“Yoshi! What are you doing!” Chloe cried out in shock.

“Yoshi?” Marco asked, a dreadful suspicion growing in his mind.

“Why don’t you ask her to taste the soup?” Yoshibumi said, still not moving.

Everyone was looking at Simone. Her blue eyes spit fire. “What the hell is going on!” she hissed and made as if she wanted to slap the blade away.

“Don’t move!” Yoshibumi snapped and pressed it deeper into her skin. Simone froze.

“Simone? Would you humour me and taste the soup?” Marco asked. His voice was polite, but Keira shivered as he walked past her; a coldness had entered his aura, and she was suddenly glad it wasn’t focused on her.

“Why would I do that? Come on Marco, I got it in the kitchen for the girl!” Simone tried to smile.

Marco looked over at Yoshibumi, standing like a statue carved from stone.

“I saw her pour something into the soup from a little bottle in her pocket,” he replied to Marco’s unspoken question.

Marco looked back at Simone. “Drink the soup,” he whispered, each syllable firing like a bullet at the woman in

front of him.

"No!" Simone cried, desperately looking around the room as if trying to get help from those gathered around her. But she met only cold, hard glares. In desperation she flung the bowl away from her, where it shattered on the stone floor and a slight vapour rose from the spilled liquid.

"Chloe," Marco called without turning to look where the Seer was.

"Here," she said and came to stand in front of Simone.

"No! What are you—really Marco, what do you think you're doing?" Simone pleaded, but no one was listening. Adam had stepped behind her and grabbed her arms, holding her tightly.

Chloe drifted even closer and placed a hand on Simone's forehead. Chloe's eyes glazed over and Rafael stood ready to catch her if needed. Very quickly, it was over, and Chloe stepped back with a look of extreme sadness on her face.

"She has been betraying us to Daemon. He managed to build a shield around her, which is why we didn't notice anything strange," the Seer said and turned away, into Rafael's arms.

The shocked silence was broken by Simone's sudden, deranged laugh. "Yes!" she shouted. "I have been right under your filthy noses and you didn't notice a thing!" she taunted them, a mad glint in her eyes.

Yoshibumi swung his sword back. "Stop!" Keira's command rang around the room, and the katana stopped a hair's width from Simone's throat.

Heads turned to Keira as she stood up from the couch. Her face was completely calm, but those closest to her looked into her eyes and shivered. Keira glided closer and stopped in front of the wild-eyed blond woman. Simone spat at her feet.

"Yoshi, please," Keira asked, still looking at Simone.

The Japanese man stepped away and sheathed his katana.

"Adam, let her go," she instructed the big Australian. He didn't argue.

"What have you done?" Keira asked Simone, her eyes narrowed and fists clenched at her side.

Simone only stared back defiantly. The silence between them stretched into millennia. Then Simone laughed and hissed at Keira, "Who are you to interrogate me. I don't answer to you!"

Keira seemed to grow in stature. "I am the High Priestess of the Guardians of the Akasha. My name is Keira, and you will obey!" her voice lashed over Simone who fell down on her knees as if bent down by an invisible force.

"I—I only—" she stammered, and looked pleadingly up at Keira. She received no help.

"He said he loved me! He said—I only gave him some information!" Simone was crying, helpless before the woman she had betrayed.

"Victoria trusted you," Keira accused.

"That old witch!" Simone spat again, mad rage returning to her eyes. "She treated me as if I was invisible! I *lived* my job and what did I get? Nothing! I should have been the next High Priestess...not *you*, some unknown girl who doesn't know *anything* about our ways."

Keira was silent, waiting. Yoshibumi could have sliced the air with his katana.

"You will never understand what it was like...living in her shadow all of those years... Then Daemon came," Simone continued, still kneeling on the floor. "He had an appointment with...*her*... He was so nice. He asked me out to dinner and he *listened* to my ideas!"

"So, you betrayed Victoria—the Guardians—everything you believed in, because he *was nice* to you?" Keira asked.

"No!" Simone shrieked. "I did it because his arguments made sense! *We* are the ones who should be ruling the Earth, not the *human cattle* who stumble around and don't know shit about anything. I will take my rightful place at his

side and we will rule!” Simone giggled insanely, standing up on wobbly legs. She pointed a finger at Keira, “You are *nothing*. The Council does not exist. You cannot do anything to me, I have to be judged by a full Council!”

“You are mistaken,” Keira replied. “We are all that is left of the Draaken, and that makes us the next Council. We will sit in judgment of your crimes against our Order and of your hand in the murder of your High Priestess.”

With her words, the remaining members of the Draaken stepped closer and formed a circle around Simone, their hands linked.

“We are the Council,” they intoned, “and we sit in judgment of your crimes.”

Simone spun around wildly, looking for a way to escape, but found none.

“Simone,” Keira continued, her face expressionless. “For your crimes against the Guardians of the Akasha and the murder of our High Priestess, you are found guilty and banished to the Void.”

“Noooooooo!” Simone screamed and threw herself at Keira. Before she could reach her, a blinding flash erupted from the centre of the circle. When everyone could see again, Simone had vanished.

Adam gave a deep sigh. “Sure would have preferred wringing her neck, though.”

## Chapter 31

Amber and Justin sat on the couch, their eyes round as saucers. Sammy and Alison stood behind them, their eyes equally huge. Keira tried to smile at them, tried to reassure them, but it was Zina who stepped forward and pulled the children into her arms. "Come," she crooned. "It has been a long night. I'll put you two to bed," and she pulled them down the passage in the direction of the guest rooms.

"I'm hungry. Can we eat first? And Amber also needs something," Justin tried to delay his going to bed.

"Wait!" Amber cried and pulled out of Zina's arms. She hurried over to the table and picked up the rolled-up scroll where she had left it. "You have to read this, it is important," she said and handed it to Keira.

Keira slowly untied the red ribbon and rolled the yellowed paper open. She scanned it with a frown. "I can't read this," she said and handed the document to Marco. He also had a look at it. "It is written in the local Czech dialect. It must be hundreds of years old; this language isn't even spoken anymore."

"I can!" Amber interrupted and held her hand out for the document. Marco handed it over to the little girl, who started reading in a soft voice.

*"'With the Gatekeeper lies the secret to the Book of Knowledge. The Gatekeeper will only reveal itself to the Chosen One at the edge of the Void. The Void's entrance lies within the castle'"*

"What does that mean?" Chloe asked with a frown.

Keira sat down. "It means that I must enter the Void."

“What!” Marco exclaimed. “No one enters the Void—not willingly. You can’t be serious?”

“Unfortunately, I am very serious,” Keira replied softly.

“I think someone has to explain. You two obviously know more about this than we do,” Zina said from the doorway.

“Yes,” Keira said. “I am sorry,” she apologized. “I couldn’t tell you until I knew who was supplying Daemon with information,” and she looked at the people around her. There were a few hurt expressions, but everyone nodded in understanding.

“Daemon is after the Book of Knowledge and now he knows that I can get it,” she continued.

“But Keira, the Book has been lost for hundreds of years. Nobody knows where it is,” Chloe said.

“Yes, that’s what everyone was supposed to think. But the High Priestess of the Akasha has always known where it is and it was part of her duty to make sure it stayed hidden. Victoria was going to show me, when I was initiated...but... Well, it didn’t work out that way. During my time with Cassandra—during the Dreaming—I was shown that it could possibly be in the Void, but no one knew for sure. I would have to enter and see for myself.”

“Keira,” Marco whispered. “You were going to the castle to enter the Void? This was your plan all along?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Cassandra suspected that the entrance is somewhere in the castle. I was hoping you would distract Daemon’s Watchers, which would give me a chance to try to find it.”

There was a stunned silence. Everyone was staring at Keira as if seeing her for the first time.

“Holy Shit!” Adam cried out. “You are one seriously crazy chick!” and he laughed with approval.

That broke the silence and everyone started talking at once.

“Quiet!” Marco shouted and glared at Keira. She looked calmly back at him.



"Why didn't you tell me," he demanded from her.

"Because you would try to stop me," she replied.

"You're damn right I would. You are not doing this!"

"Oh, really? I am not having this discussion with you, this is my decision!" Keira jumped up from the chair.

"No, it is not. You have a responsibility!"

"Yes," she agreed. "That responsibility includes keeping the Akasha safe from people like Daemon, who want to use it for their own gain. If he gets the Book, he will be able to alter time. I really have no choice."

They stood glaring at each other, not aware of their identical, crossed-arms stance.

"Well," Rafael said drily. "You two obviously have something going on..."

Keira and Marco swung around in unison and turned their glares on him.

"Okay!" he laughed, holding his hands up. "It was just an observation!" He then turned serious. "This information changes things. We have to rethink our strategy for attacking the castle. The plan was to form groups of two and go about it stealthily, from all sides. But if Keira needs a distraction, we will have to make one big show of it; which will draw all the Watchers away from where she will enter and start her search."

Soon everyone was involved in discussing tactics and strategies. The room was buzzing; even Alison and Sammy had been included in the debate. Adam had found some of Sammy's suggestions very interesting, and the two sat with their heads bent together, a clear attraction forming between them. Alison and Yoshi had overcome their natural shyness and were also taking part in the discussion.

Marco stood with his back to the group, staring out of a window at the dark forest. Keira walked to him and lay her hand on his arm.

"Marco—"

"Yes?"

“There is no other way.”

“I know, and that is what makes this so hard.”

He turned to her and wrapped her in his arms. “But you are not doing this alone. I will be next to you, every step of the way.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “It’s selfish, but I don’t want it any other way.”

They stood in silence for a long moment. Keira relished the feel of his arms around her. She felt warm, safe. Soon she would walk, knowingly, into a trap. She wanted to enjoy Marco’s presence while she still had the chance.

Rafael cleared his throat. “I think we’ve worked it out then. The Draaken will approach the castle’s gate and demand Daemon’s surrender. He won’t, of course, and we will keep them busy while Keira and Marco slip around to the south wall, climb over, and search for the entrance to the Void.”

“Short and sweet,” Adam said. “Just the way you like it!” his sisters chimed in, and everyone laughed, breaking the tension.

Rafael continued. “Alison and Sammy will stay here with Justin and Amber. They will wait for twelve hours; if they don’t hear anything from us by then, or if we are not back, they will take the children to London.”

Silence met his words. No one wanted to think of the reason that would happen.

Zina cleared her throat. “Now, as your Healer, I have to insist that everyone get some rest. It is five in the morning already. I assume we’re keeping to the plan to leave at eleven?”

Marco nodded. “One last thing,” he said. “We can expect some resistance along the way. It is important that the Watchers see Keira with us, until such time as she and I can slip away. Understood?”

“Yes, yes,” Adam grumbled. “Don’t hurt the poor little Watchers too much, they have to carry messages back to

their Master!" Everyone laughed at his sulking as they filed out of the room in the direction of their bedrooms.

Marco and Keira were left alone. He still had an arm around her shoulder, and slowly turned her to face him. A warm glow of anticipation grew in her heart.

"Keira?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered with a smile. She took his hand and led him to her room. He walked inside and she closed the door softly behind her.

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The soft beeping from Marco's wristwatch on the bedside table woke them a few hours later. Keira lifted herself on one arm and looked at the man lying next to her. His blue eyes were half open and he smiled sleepily. The usual lines on his forehead were smoothed out; his face was calm and relaxed.

She softly stroked the smooth skin of his neck where it met his shoulder and traced the outline of the flame tattoo on his upper arm with her finger. She bent forward and kissed a scar across his right collarbone, her lips finding the pulse beating above it.

He groaned, grabbed her wrists and tumbled her over onto her back, his body lying half over hers.

"Marco! We have to get up!" she laughed and tried to wriggle out underneath him.

"Hmm," he said, nibbling at her ear. Then he jumped out of bed and pulled her up after him, into his arms where he proceeded to kiss her until her knees threatened to give way.

"Can you stand?" he asked with a wicked grin.

"Yes!" she laughed and mock slapped his arm. "Come, we have to get ready."

They were the last to walk into the living room where everyone greeted them with knowing smiles. Keira blushed, but Marco just strolled in with a self-satisfied grin and

poured two cups of coffee from the breakfast fare Magda had laid out for them.

“Good...um...I see everyone is ready...” Keira mumbled and took the coffee Marco handed her. She took a quick gulp and nearly seared her throat.

Chloe took pity on her and threw the group a strict glare. “Yes,” she said. “We’re ready. Magda’s son has the truck waiting outside.”

“Good,” Keira said again. Sudden nerves fluttered in her stomach. They were actually going to do this.

She walked to Sammy and Alison and held their hands in her own. There were no words. The three women looked at each other with wavering smiles.

“I am so sorry to have dragged you into this,” Keira eventually forced out of her tight throat.

“Don’t be silly,” Sammy admonished her. “I told you before, this is the most excitement I’ve had in years!”

Alison nodded in agreement and brushed a rogue tear from her cheek. “Don’t worry about the kids, we’ll take care of them.”

“I know you will. Thank you,” Keira whispered and gave each of them a long hug.

“Now go!” Sammy said and pushed her away. “Go break a leg—or better yet, go break that bastard’s leg and tell him it’s from me!”

Keira nodded and waved to her friends as she walked through the front door, followed by Marco and the rest of the Draaken. They got into the back of a rusty Bedford truck, closed the green canvas covering, and were soon bouncing along a dirt track in the direction of the border between Germany and the Czech Republic. They travelled in silence, except for the occasional curse when the truck hit another pothole and they were thrown about on the hard, metal seats. By the time they reached the drop-off point, everyone was grateful to get out and stretch their aching bodies.

One the old truck had coughed its way out of sight back towards the Herberg, the silence was deafening. They stood next to a narrow, two-track dirt road, surrounded by towering oaks, silver firs and pine trees. A cornflower-blue sky promised a cloudless day.

Keira had one hand behind her neck, trying to massage out the knotted muscles. "Here, let me," Zina offered and gave her neck a quick rub.

"Oh, thanks. That feels so much better," Keira groaned.

"Okay, let's go," Marco said. He took the lead as the group left the track and silently filed through the dark trees. This time, Keira knew where to put her feet and she had no trouble keeping up with the Draaken. Her return to the castle was very different from the agonizing, fear-filled escape a couple of months ago.

Two hours later, Marco called for a rest stop next to a small stream. The group waited for everyone to catch up and took turns drinking from the clear water.

"How much further?" Keira asked.

"About an hour," Marco replied.

A loud caw from the trees up ahead of them had everyone on their feet in a flash.

"Shit!" A guttural, unfamiliar voice cried out and then a group of black-clad Watchers erupted from the forest and ran at full speed straight at the Draaken.

Keira connected with the Akasha at once and felt the build-up of power as she got ready to toss energy pulses at the advancing figures. The ringing of steel told her that Yoshi had engaged with the attackers; then the earth rippled under her feet as Adam slammed his hammer on the ground, taking three Watchers down.

Chloe and Rafael were fighting as one person, whirling and somersaulting over Watchers' heads in a dance that would have been beautiful to watch, if it wasn't so deadly. Zina and Kamau had found their rhythm as well and crumpled figures were a testament to their passing.

A line of fire seared past her, enveloping a Watcher creeping up behind her. She scarcely had time to thank Marco, when he screamed, "Cover your ears!"

The sound that followed pierced through Keira's hands as she fell to her knees. Eyes watering, she looked up and saw the twins, Nikki and Jemma, advancing through their ranks right up to the remaining Watchers, who stumbled back and tried to escape from the two beautiful blond girls. One Watcher's hands dropped and Keira could see blood erupting from his ears; he fell to the ground with unseeing eyes. Two Watchers made it to the trees and ran for their lives.

"Stop!" Adam bellowed. The screeching didn't seem to affect him in any way and he waved to his sisters, who skipped back to his side.

"Sorry, loves, but we had to let them carry a message back to their Master, remember?" he smiled proudly at them.

"Next time, please give us more warning!" Rafael grumbled and helped Chloe up from where she was crouched on the ground, still covering her ears.

"It doesn't affect you, at all?" Keira asked Adam in amazement.

"Nope," he replied casually. "Well, let's admit, it's no swan song, but for some reason my head doesn't explode when they do it. Must be a family thing."

"That's handy," Rafael drawled.

Everyone dusted themselves off and got ready for the last stretch to the castle.

\*\*\*\*\*

Daemon was standing with his back to the door when it crashed open. Two dishevelled Watchers burst in and bent over, gasping for air.

"Yes?" he asked, without moving an inch.

"Sir—sorry, Sir—Julius said you were in here—they are coming!" one of the figures managed to say.

"Good," Daemon said and continued looking out of the window in what used to be Victoria's bedchamber.

"You can go now," he said and waved them out with an impatient flick of his wrist.

The door opened again.

"Don't you knock?" Damon asked with an annoyed frown.

"Sorry, Sir! Shall I come back and try again?" Julius asked.

"Dear Julius, if you weren't so useful..." Daemon threatened.

Julius thought it best not to push his luck. His time would come, though he knew better than to think it too loudly.

"Simone wasn't with the Draaken," Julius said.

"She also didn't check in with me at our agreed time. We have to assume she has been exposed. A pity really, she was an asset," Daemon sighed.

"The Watchers are ready. Guards have been stationed on the walls," Julius informed his Master.

"Remember, no one attacks until I give the sign!" Daemon told his lieutenant. "I need her alive!"

Julius nodded and left the room. Daemon turned again and stared through the window to the forest beyond the walls.

*Come to me Keira.... I am waiting.*

## Chapter 32

The Draaken stood just inside the last row of trees, overlooking the narrow expanse of clear ground between them and the castle's moat.

"It is time," Keira said. She reached out on either side of her and everyone linked hands in a long chain. She closed her eyes and connected with the Akasha. The group immediately felt their power raised to a new level as a surge of energy swept through the line. Eyes became more focused and lips set with greater determination.

"For the Guardians... For Victoria," she whispered and the chant went down the line. Hands unclasped and the Draaken walked side by side towards the gate, open and uncovered.

It wasn't long before a shout sounded from the castle's boundary wall. "They are here!"

The nine members of the Draaken stopped a few metres from the raised drawbridge.

Keira and Marco watched them from the cover of the trees, apprehension in their eyes; he took her hand again. "Come," he said and pulled her to the left, staying in the shadows. Keira kept looking over her shoulders at her friends, dwarfed in front of the indestructible castle and outnumbered by the figures on its walls.

*May the Akasha be with you!*

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Inside the castle, Daemon raised his head and sniffed the air like a bloodhound. He eagerly left his room and



strode down the halls, through the front door, across the courtyard and up the stone stairs leading to the top of the parapet overlooking the moat and road approaching the castle. The drawbridge was raised.

Insults came flying across the moat. "Come down you mommy's boys!" and "Hiding behind your master's silk panties are you?"

Grumbles were starting among the ranks of the Watchers, which quickly quieted when Daemon arrived. He stood, looking down on the Draaken, who also fell silent when they saw him.

Rafael stepped forward and shouted up at Daemon. "Come down here and fight man-to-man, you coward! Lower that drawbridge!"

"Where is your leader?" Daemon asked, his eyes scanning the surrounding forest.

"I am the leader!" Rafael replied.

"Don't waste my time," Daemon said, his voice filled with scorn. "You are but a boy living in your brother's shadow. Where...is...Keira!" he shouted, his hands gripping the edge of the stone wall.

"Do you think we'd be stupid enough to bring her straight to you?" Rafael mocked. "We got her friends back... they are safe! Why the hell would she come here?"

Daemon glared at the smirking group on the other side of the moat.

"Lower the drawbridge," he instructed a Watcher standing next to him.

"But, Sir! They will cross—" a Watcher made the mistake of protesting. An energy bolt from Daemon's hand threw him from the top of the wall and his limp body hit the moat with a splash.

At a glance from Daemon, another Watcher rushed to do his bidding and the drawbridge was lowered with creaks and groans of its heavy chains.

“Get ready,” Rafael whispered to his friends. He glanced over at Chloe, who smiled at him reassuringly. “I love you,” they whispered and then concentrated on the advancing hordes.

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The thunder of erupting power surges and the screams and yells of battle reached Marco and Keira where they stood, panting and dripping wet, pressed against the castle’s wall. They had run across the open field when they heard Rafael shouting, then slipped into the moat and swam to the opposite bank. Keira expected a bolt of energy to hit them at any time, but nothing happened. The Draaken had successfully drawn all the Watchers to the west gate.

Marco knelt down and pressed his hands on the ground. A quick incantation and a small green vine erupted from the mud. It grew thicker and thicker and, in a matter of seconds twined itself up the wall and over the top.

“So, you have a thing with plants?” Keira asked with her hands on her hips.

“Among other things,” Marco grinned back. “Let’s go,” he said and held his linked hands for Keira. He gave her a boost up and she climbed the now-thick vine to the top of the wall. Marco was right behind her as she swung her leg over the edge, and they lay panting on their stomachs. The wall curved away left and right, forming a circle around the courtyard and inner buildings. Across the yard, they could see the through the open gate and over the lowered drawbridge. A battle was raging outside around the Draaken, who had formed a circle and were fending off attackers from all sides.

“I can’t see Daemon!” Keira whispered.

“There,” Marco pointed. Daemon was stalking up and down, shooting energy bolts from his safe position at the top of the wall. Keira could see his face, contorted with rage.

The urge to run at him and engage him in battle was overwhelming, but, as if reading her thoughts, Marco put one hand on her arm and pointed with the other to the nearby stairs.

Silently they crept down the stairs, their backs to the wall, keeping a wary eye on Daemon's outline, as well as a lookout for any stray Watchers. There was a small wooden door at the bottom of the stairs; Marco softly turned the handle and they slipped inside the castle.

They were in a storeroom. Wooden crates were stacked against one wall and, against another, metal shelves held tinned food and cleaning supplies. Marco beckoned at Keira to follow as he carefully found his way around brooms and mops lying on the floor.

He slowly inched another door open, peered through the crack, and, satisfied that there was no one there, pulled Keira by her hand into the kitchen. Gleaming copper pots hung from hooks in the exposed wooden beams. A long oak table stood in the middle of the room; the edge of a worn woollen blanket was visible underneath it. They crossed the tiled floor and went up a flight of stairs on the other side of the room.

Keira felt as if her heart was climbing into her throat and anxiety gripped her stomach tight. Then she looked at Marco's broad back in front of her, his body alert to every sound and movement in the passage beyond, and she was suddenly very grateful he was there. She didn't know how she could ever have done this by herself.

"This way," Marco whispered, indicating the long hallway leading into the heart of the castle. Keira had not been here before and had to trust Marco as he took them down twisting and turning steps, passages and corridors.

Soon, she recognised the Library's big double doors. They crept closer and Marco indicated that Keira should wait to the side, against the wall. He pulled one of the doors open and scanned the room; it was clear. He beckoned her closer.

They slipped inside and Marco closed the door. Keira walked to the middle of the room, then slowly turned and looked at all the bookshelves surrounding them.

"I don't know why I thought we should start here," she whispered. *Besides the fact that this is the last place I saw Aunt Vic alive*, she thought.

Keira looked at Marco in despair. "I don't know what to do!"

They were both silent. A clock on the wall was ticking, reminding them that time was running out. The sounds of the battle couldn't penetrate the castle walls, but that didn't stop them from imagining what their friends were facing.

"There must be a way—a reason—why only you can find the Gateway. Why Daemon can't." Marco paced. "Keira, when you were with Cassandra, did she teach you how to sense magick, the way that Victoria could?" He stopped, sudden hope in his eyes.

"Yes, she did," Keira replied. "Oh! The Gatekeeper is a creature of magick, so I should be able to sense that magic in the Akasha. But, why didn't Daemon find it then? He's been looking for it forever?"

"It has to be something about your position as High Priestess. It could even be in your blood," Marco said.

"Okay, it's all we've got. Marco, I will have to connect deeply with the Akasha to find that trace. It might take some time—"

"You do what you have to, I'll keep watch," he replied and went to stand guard by the library's door.

Keira nodded, closed her eyes, crossed her legs, and extended her arms, palms upward. She took a few calming breaths, allowing her conscious mind to slip away and her unconscious mind to connect with the Akasha, the space around her.

She immediately felt that warm, tingling feeling across her body. Even though her eyes were closed, she could see her environment through her senses. The air was a hazy

colour of grey, and, through that, the multi-coloured ribbons of the Akasha that tied everything together shone like a glittering fisherman's net. A particularly beautiful scarlet ribbon connected her to Marco.

Keira left her body and drifted on the currents swirling through the room. Magick was everywhere, its scent as rich and varied as the people who used it, but Daemon's brand dominated the room. Dark ribbons of sludge crept closer and wrapped around her corporeal form, dragging her down and threatening her control.

*Is this how Chloe felt when he trapped her?*

A sudden image of roses and dew and sunshine entered Keira's awareness, giving her the strength she needed to kick the darkness away. Fresh grief hit her as she felt the lingering trace of Victoria's magick.

Free from Daemon's influence, Keira extended her senses even more, beyond the room and down the castle's hallways, outside and up until she was hovering above the ancient fortress. Beyond the drawbridge, a golden orb spun and was on the edge of being overwhelmed by the spread of inky blackness.

Keira concentrated harder and entered a level of the Akasha that was deeper than she had ever gone before.

*There...* A hint of coldness caused goosebumps to break out over her physical body. *Got it!*

She slammed back in her body. Marco still stood by the door.

"How long did that take?" Keira asked, jumping up from the floor.

"Only a few seconds. Did you find anything?"

"Yes, let's go. Daemon will know I'm here."

They ran from the room. This time, Keira led the way. She hadn't seen any Watchers nearby while connected to the Akasha. But even if she had, there was no time for stealth.

Keira was like a bloodhound on a trail. The cold ribbon called her in the right direction.

Soon they were in a part of the castle even Marco didn't know. They followed stairs up and down, ran along narrow corridors that twisted and looped, and crossed dusty halls that clearly hadn't been used in years.

The coldness was getting stronger. It was an arctic splinter in her mind and Keira's insides slowly filled with dread.

"We're getting closer," she whispered over her shoulder and slowed down to a walk.

Marco nodded. "I feel something too."

They turned another corner and stepped into an empty, circular room. There was no other way forward. Bare, grey stone walls closed them in. The room must have been twenty feet across and the walls rose another twenty feet then met in a dome above their heads. The only light came from the passage behind them and even that was dim. They walked along the walls and pushed and prodded the stones, looking for hidden levers or buttons that would open a doorway, but there was nothing.

## Chapter 33

Keira was freezing. She rubbed her arms, trying to get rid of the cold and the fear inside of her. "It must be here," she said, swallowing hard.

Marco wrapped his arms around her when he saw how cold she was. "Well, it has to. But where is the door—"

"It must be in the Akasha. That would explain why we can't see it."

"Yes," Marco agreed. "Can you find it?"

Keira didn't answer immediately. Every fibre of her body was screaming, warning of danger. She nodded. "I'll have to."

"I'll keep watch," Marco said. "Please be careful," he whispered in her ear and gave her a last kiss, the warmth of his lips reaching through the frost in Keira's body. He left to position himself just outside the arch leading into the passage winding back the way they'd come.

Keira sat down on the floor, her back to the wall, crossed her legs and closed her eyes. Her body immediately felt as if it had been dumped in liquid hydrogen. She wanted to scream Marco's name, but couldn't. She was encased in ice, she couldn't move or even moan to voice her fear.

A battle raged in Keira as she strove to slow her pounding heart down and banish thoughts of death and destruction. Little by little, she clawed her way back to control until she was able to focus, calmly and clearly. A deep breath and she connected to the Akasha, seeing the room through her senses.

A section of the wall directly in front of her shimmered and rippled like a mirage. Then, the stones slowly

disappeared and revealed a tunnel, softly lit by a swirling mist a few metres in. Keira let go of her body and drifted into the tunnel.

The Akasha wasn't beautiful here. It was stark white. There were no scents, only a metallic vapour that burned her throat and nose. She couldn't see beyond the mist and fought for control of her senses, trying not to get lost as she moved, in what she thought was a forward direction.

After what could have been an eternity, Keira discerned a slight breeze touching her face. The Akasha shifted, as if it was lifting, and Keira eagerly drifted towards a shape in the distance.

*Blue...*

Keira wanted to sob in relief to see the blue gateway after the endless white. It stretched up so high into the mist, she couldn't see the end of it. It was wide as well, at least thirty feet. As Keira got closer, she saw that every inch of its surface was covered in small, teardrop shaped tiles painted with intricate patterns and *nazars*, the blue, white, and black Turkish wards against the evil eye.

A young girl stood in the gateway. Her eyes were the colour of a lion's, a golden yellow that welcomed and warned at the same time. Long, waist-length black hair rippled down her back. Her white gown floated like gossamer in the breeze, and her small white hands were clasped in front of her.

*Welcome Keira.*

*Who are you? How do you know my name?*

*I am the Gatekeeper, Keira. I have been expecting you.*

*Then...then you must know why—*

*Yes, you have come for the Book of Knowledge.*

*So, is it here?*

*To find the answer to that, you have to enter the Void... and find your way back.*

*What do you mean? Is it there?*



Keira tried to see past the girl, through the gateway... and was robbed of her breath. What she saw on the other side was beyond anything—it was nothing. The Void was exactly that—a black hole in space, devoid of matter, and it stretched away into infinity.

*There is nothing!*

*Yes.*

*How can that be?*

*It is simple. It is like everything else, yin and yang, matter and anti-matter, Akasha and Void.*

Dim sounds reached through the mist to Keira's awareness. She turned and peered through the greyness. She thought she could hear Marco's shouts and the sounds of fighting.

*Marco!*

She immediately tried to reach back to the stone room.

*Stop!*

The girl's voice dragged her back to the gateway.

*I have to go! Marco needs me!*

*You have been followed here. You have opened the portal. If you go now, Daemon will enter the Void and may find the Knowledge. Are you willing to let that happen?*

*No! But Marco...my friends!*

*They will keep Daemon away from the Gate, giving you time to do what you must.*

*I can't let them die for me. I have to help them!*

*Are you going to make the same mistake Victoria did?*

The girl asked very quietly.

The realization slammed into Keira like a freight train.

*She—she was here.*

*Yes.*

*And... Roberto... he died here.*

*Yes, in that room behind you, protecting her body from Daemon's grandfather.*

*And—the mistake she made—she never entered the Void, did she?*

*No. She never found the Knowledge. She turned around, went back to the room, but she was too late.*

A moan dragged itself up from the deepest part of Keira's soul, wrenching its way out her mouth. Victoria's choice had repercussions, the biggest of which led to Keira being the one standing in front of the gateway, facing that same impossible choice.

Would she do the same? Would she turn her back on the one thing that might save them all, to try to save the man she loved? Choices spun out before Keira, each leading to their own resolutions.

Back in the circular room, a frozen tear rolled over Keira's still cheek, unseen by her battling warrior.

*You have to choose,* the girl whispered.

Before she could change her mind, Keira flung herself through the gateway and into the Void. She was immediately lost. There was no sound, not even the rush of air as she kept tumbling...trying to find something to hold onto. There were no stars, no way to tell which side was up and which was down. There was nothing.

Keira's control fled as fear wormed into her like maggots and panic overwhelmed her. She was blind.

*Cassandra! Victoria! Help me!*

There was no answer to her plea. Despair robbed Keira of any hope and courage she might have had left. She would be trapped in the Void until the end of time, her body slowly rotting away on the earthly plane. Her friends and family would age and die, never knowing of her endless torture.

It would be so easy to give up, to release herself from the pressures of responsibility and duty and other people's expectations. She could float forever, not affected by the world and its insanity.

The Void took Keira in its embrace, wrapping her in a cocoon of silence and isolation, tempting her soul with its lure of everlasting peace.

In that moment before her complete surrender, a spark of defiance ignited. Keira could finally admit it to herself: she didn't want to be alone. She didn't want to die. She wanted to live and be happy and be a part of something bigger than herself, not because of duty, but because of her own free will. And because she believed in magick.

With that thought, came a flicker of calmness. Keira grabbed it and held onto it as if it was a newborn baby.

*I will not die. I will get back.*

She felt something in her arms. It was the baby, born out of her hope. The child looked up at her and the moment their eyes locked, Keira understood.

*There is no Book... There is only Knowledge... And the Knowledge is now within me.*

She couldn't help but feel sad for Victoria who never reached this understanding.

Keira softly hugged the child to her neck and smiled. Overwhelming love and peace flowed through her in a river of emotion. Then she was left with empty arms as the illusion of the child shimmered and faded away.

Keira looked up into the smiling eyes of the Gatekeeper.

*Welcome back.*

*Thank you. I understand now.*

*Good. You will need that knowledge in the future. Let it guide you and apply it well. And remember, others will covet that which you now carry inside of you.*

Keira nodded. She had to go. She flew back through the white barrier separating her from Marco. Back in her body, Keira's eyes snapped open. Marco crouched with his back to her, holding off a crush of Watchers who fought through the narrow opening, two at a time. A heap of bodies lay around him, evidence of his desperate battle to keep her safe. Long gashes ran down his arms and across his body; blood stained his white shirt. She could hear him gasping in exhaustion, but he didn't stop fighting.

Her blast of power caught a Watcher in midair as he jumped over his comrades' bodies, straight at Marco. The shockwave threw all the Watchers back like a string of connected dominoes.

"Keira!" Marco cried. "Your—" but she didn't hear what he said as the next wave of attackers pressed into the room.

Keira and Marco fought their way back into the castle, their movements flowing together as if choreographed for an elaborate ballet. Their arms and bodies swayed with the rhythm of their combined power, creating an indestructible force that wiped Watchers out of their way as they advanced down the passage.

As they broke through the last line of attackers, Keira saw a black suited figure fleeing in the distance. The man glanced over his shoulder, his face contorted in a snarl.

"Daemon!" she cried and gave chase.

Keira and Marco ran side by side, following Daemon as he tried to escape. Watchers appeared from side passages but were no match for the couple in their pursuit of their enemy. As Daemon threw energy bolts at them, they ducked behind statues and furniture, which exploded into clouds of shards and splinters.

They were gaining on him, when he reached the front door, threw it open, and flew down the steps into the courtyard, into the midst of the raging battle. The Draaken had crossed the drawbridge and were exterminating the last of the Watchers who were desperately trying to regain lost territory.

"Daemon!" Keira's voice reverberated over the courtyard. Everyone froze and looked up to where she stood at the top of the steps, flanked by Marco.

Daemon stopped as well, halfway to the drawbridge. He turned around and tried to smirk.

"Yes?" he asked, nonchalant, but his heels inched backwards towards the gate and his eyes slid from side to side, trying to find an escape.

“Going anywhere?” Adam asked from where Chetan, Yoshi and he had taken position behind Daemon.

“Watchers!” Keira called. “You have been misled. You were promised glory and riches...but there is a new Council in session. Drop your weapons, stop fighting and you will be pardoned! Go back to your Families and tell them what has happened here. I give them a choice: they can pledge their allegiance to us—to peace—or be banished!”

It didn’t take long for the majority of the Watchers to nod their acquiescence; those with weapons dropped them. A few were defiant, until they saw her eyes. The last weapons thudded to the cobblestones.

“Cowards!” Daemon screamed. “She is just a stupid girl! Attack! Fight!”

But the Watchers were backing away from him. One by one, they reached the gate and fled over the drawbridge, down the road beyond. Soon only the Draaken were left.

And Daemon.

Keira walked down the steps, her head held high and her stride assured. She stopped at the bottom. Where Victoria had died.

Daemon glared at her from a few feet away. “You think this is over—it will *never* be over! You think you know what it takes to lead... You don’t have what it takes—you can’t do it!”

“Please don’t presume to know what I think. Or what I can and cannot do,” Keira said politely.

“Ha! I will get rid of you, the same way I did your beloved aunt,” Daemon spat and flung his arms out towards Keira. A ripple of power hit the invisible wall she had conjured in front of her. She stood looking at him as he tried, again and again, until he was panting with exhaustion.

Only then did she move closer. She lifted her hand and a bolt of white light knocked Daemon to his knees.

“Daemon, you are hereby charged with murder, treason against the Council and the attempt to use the Akasha for

your own gain. How do you plead?"

"How...dare...you!" he grunted. "You are nothing!"

Marco stepped closer and took Keira's hand. The Draaken joined them and together they formed a circle around the man kneeling on the ground, their hands linked. "We are the Council," they intoned, "and we sit in judgment of your crimes."

Keira looked at her friends. Their clothes were torn and a few of them were bleeding, but they were all there and looked at her with respect and trust.

"I am the High Priestess of the Guardians of the Akasha. I speak for the Council. We find you guilty as charged. You are hereby banished to the Void, never to return."

A blinding flash of white light erupted from the circle, leaving only an echo of Daemon's scream of rage, nothing else.

It was over.

The Draaken warriors were laughing, clapping each other on the back and rushing to congratulate Keira. But she had eyes only for Marco as he pulled her closer and enveloped her in his arms.

"I love you," she said, her eyes closed as she leaned into his strength.

"I love you." He stroked her dark hair, his fingers entwined in the long shock of silver-grey streaking down the left side of her face.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two days later the castle reverberated with the happy noises of laughter and renovation work being done in the Great Hall. A huge bonfire roared in the courtyard and children from the village danced as Daemon's family crest went up in flames.

Keira stood by a car with Sammy and Alison.

"I am really sorry I can't go back with you now," Keira said. "There is just so much to be done here..."

"Don't worry about it," Alison said and hugged Keira goodbye.

"And you should probably expect a visit from my parents, too," Keira apologized again.

"Hey, we'll smooth things over in London. You take your time and come see us when you're ready," Sammy said and hugged Keira as well.

"It won't be too long," Keira promised. "There are lawyers...and stuff...that need to be sorted."

"Well, we'll keep your room in the apartment ready. You know, in case you get bored having this *huge* castle all to yourself," Alison laughed.

The three women smiled and stood in silence for a while. They wanted to prolong the last goodbye.

"Keep an eye on Adam for me," Sammy said and tried to wipe a tear away unseen.

"Oh?" Keira asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, he said he'll come visit in London as soon as he's taken care of his Family's business. So make sure he doesn't get distracted by any cute little magickal...thingies!"

"Okay, okay!" Keira laughed as her friends got into the car. She kept on waving until they had gone over the drawbridge and disappeared down the drive, on their way to the private plane—her private plane—that would whisk them back to London.

She walked past the fountain where Justin and Amber were helping her father clear dead leaves out of the fountainheads.

"Should have it going again in a few minutes, Miss Keira," the old man called.

Keira gave him a friendly wave, smiled at the children, and skipped up the steps into the Great Hall. There she watched as the embroidered Wilde Family crest was rehung above the fireplace.

Strong arms caught her from behind and she jumped with fright. "All is as it should be," Marco whispered in her ear and she relaxed with a laugh.

"Almost," she agreed and then led him to the reception room just off the Great Hall where the Draaken waited for them.

The room fell silent as they entered. Eyes glistened with unshed emotion as everyone got ready to take their leave.

Keira had to clear the tightness in her throat before she could speak.

"I thank you all, with every cell in my body, for what you have done. I joined you as a complete stranger, and now you are my family. You have saved my life time and again, and never asked why."

The tears were now freely flowing; Adam gave a sniff and pretended to blow his nose and even Yoshibumi stared down at the floor.

"You are no longer the Draaken, but full members of Council. I believe that each one of you will lead with honor, dignity, and truth. Before you all go back to your homes and settle your affairs, I ask one more thing of you. We have to elect a new Leader of Council and I would like to propose Marco."

"Keira," Marco protested.

"Please, Marco. I know the tradition—that Victoria expected us to do this together. But I don't have the background and, for now, I have to concentrate on learning my duties as High Priestess. I will be better able to fulfil those duties if I know that you are there to lead the Council," Keira said.

Marco bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"Agreed," Rafael said. The word echoed around the room.

"Thank you," Marco said. "I am honored and I accept. My first instruction to you would be to identify new initiates from your Families and send them here. We have to reopen



the School as soon as possible; training for new Draaken members has to resume as well. I expect we'll have a few issues from renegade Families, especially those aligned most closely to Daemon. It means that there are a busy few months ahead, and our resources will be spread thin."

"Agreed," Chetan said and everyone nodded.

Then, one by one, the friends took leave of each other and left the castle in a cavalcade of cars and motorbikes. Soon only Keira and Marco remained, standing by the front door, waving to the last of their friends driving down the road.

They stood for a long time, their arms around each other, until Justin called, "Come on, you two!", and sent a swirling funnel of water in their direction.

"Oh, yeah? You're on!" Keira cried and ran towards them, followed by a laughing Marco. She lifted her hands and all the water in the fountain rose ten feet into the air only to come pouring back down on Justin and Amber's heads.

"Woohoo, that is so cool!" Amber laughed and winked out of sight.

"Wow," Justin said, staring at Amber as she reappeared. "You are a Shadow Walker! No wonder I could never find you when we played hide-and-seek. No fair!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Far away, atop a hill, Julius trained his binoculars on the castle. He watched as the last car left; watched through the open gate as the figures splashed and played in the fountain.

"Have your fun," he muttered. "My time will come."

THE END

# Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my husband and children for their unending patience and support. Thanks for giving me the time I needed to finish this. Here's to the next one!

Thanks to my parents, for feeding my reading addiction.

Every writer needs a beta reader. Thanks to Jennifer Smith for being mine, and sorry for making you read all those drafts.

Every writer also needs a group of friends who will drag her out of the house on a regular basis, ply her with copious amounts of alcohol and remind her there is a world outside of her own imagination. Thanks to my Beijing Wine and Whine *péngyou's* for doing that and so much more.

To editor extraordinaire, [Shawn MacKenzie](#), you are a dragon among mortals. Thanks for making me look better than I am.

To formatting genius, [Heather Adkins](#). Thanks for doing your magic and rescuing me from the alien world of computer-speak.

To talented designer, [Stephanie Mooney](#). Thanks for the beautiful cover (I am restraining myself from gushing...). I didn't know what I wanted when I contacted you, and you got it right anyway.

## About the Author

At the time of publishing, I lived with my family in Beijing, China. After getting over a slight case of culture shock, I decided to give in to the voices in my head and write what I like to read. Thanks for taking the time to read this novel; I would love to hear from you.

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